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**PRINCES, PRIESTS, AND PEOPLE:
IS SAUDI ARABIA THE NEXT IRAN?**

by

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September 2005

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PRINCES, PRIESTS, AND PEOPLE: IS SAUDI ARABIA THE NEXT IRAN?

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ABSTRACT

Renewed violent attacks in Saudi Arabia against the monarchy, combined with growing concern over royal corruption has led some analysts to predict that Saudi Arabia is likely to be “the next Iran”—that Islamist revolutionaries will come to power in Riyadh. I test this theory through the lens of network analysis in order to measure the degree of state-society integration in Pahlavi Iran and Saudi Arabia. My analysis finds that a) the Saudi state is far more integrated in society through social networks than the Pahlavi state; and b) the radical opposition in Saudi is far less entrenched in society than the Khomeini-led opposition in Iran, a movement that was able to activate significant informal urban networks to mobilize the population. While both are rentier states, Saudi networks in society have effectively overcome the structural state weakness and potential instability that distributive political economies often engender. The shah had no equivalent system of networks linking regime to society, and thus was more vulnerable to revolution.

Thus, while Saudi Arabia has significant internal problems, it is highly unlikely that those problems will be manifested as a social revolution. Persistent demands for reform and periodic bouts of violence are more likely outcomes.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. SCOPE AND PURPOSE

In a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, Richard Clarke, a counterterrorism advisor during the Clinton Administration wrote a futuristic look back at the post-9/11 years. “The Saudi coup marked one of the worst U.S. intelligence failures in years. We were caught off guard because we had not been able to effectively collect intelligence inside “the kingdom,” as it was then called. We relied on the Saudi Ministry of the Interior to tell us how strong the *ihadis*¹ were, and whether there was serious opposition to the king” (Clarke, 2005). No such coup has taken place as of this writing, but Mr. Clarke is not alone among knowledgeable students of the Middle East in his doom-saying. Michael Doran, a respected Near East scholar, describes Saudi Arabia as “in the throes of a crisis” (Doran, 2004). Robert Baer, a career CIA field officer in the Middle East, has also suggested the imminent demise of the Saudi regime: “...the country is run by an increasingly dysfunctional royal family...today’s Saudi Arabia can’t last much longer—and the social and economic fallout of the demise could be calamitous” (Baer, 2003b).

The last calamitous regime collapse in the Middle East, from the U.S. perspective, was the fall of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. This event shocked U.S. foreign policy makers and completely disrupted the balance of power in the Middle East. This thesis examines the Iranian case in order to answer the question, “Is the Saudi opposition structurally capable of toppling the Al Saud?” I argue that the most important factor for either regime durability or opposition success is state-society integration. Iran’s opposition was firmly rooted in society through informal urban networks, while the Shah’s regime was not. Conversely, the Al Saud are well integrated with Saudi society

¹ *Jihad* is a contested term in the Islamic world. Most Muslims think of jihad as a struggle against ones internal demons, although the term also connotes holy war against nonbelievers, or infidels. *Jihadi* is a name commonly ascribed to violent Islamic radicals by western commentators, but to Islamic holy warriors by adherents to radical-leaning interpreters of Islam. Other terms include *jihadist* and *jihadism*, which describe, respectively, members of jihadi political factions and the political ideology of jihad. A more detailed description can be found in Chapter II.

through extensive patronage networks, while the Saudi opposition which seeks to overthrow the regime is marginalized.

The thesis question implies, by using the term “opposition,” that a unified, or at least organized, political force is functioning to check the power of the current Saudi regime. This is not clearly the case. There are fragments of Saudi society who are opposed to the royal family’s firm grip on real political and economic power and the absence of civil liberties which western societies take for granted: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and universal suffrage. The traditional religious establishment, on the other hand, is firmly behind (and well paid by) the regime, but opposes the reformist agenda. Another influential group of clerics criticize both the royal family and violent Islamic radicals. The only violent threat to the government, however, comes from Clarke’s aforementioned jihadis, Islamic revolutionaries promoting an ideology rich with the symbols and slogans whose ownership determines the legitimacy of power in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam.

The thesis question also implies that the Saudi opposition *wants* to topple the Saudi royal family. This is certainly true for the aforementioned Islamic revolutionaries, whose 1996 Declaration of War against “American Crusaders” on the Arabian Peninsula claimed that armed struggle is necessary to defeat the apostate Al Saud regime by defeating the regime’s source of strength² (Al-Mass’ari, 1996). By their own accounts, Usama bin Laden (UBL) and al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP)³ aim to foment a revolution which removes the ruling family in order to establish a nation which conforms to a puritanical version of Islam—a revolution that would undoubtedly have at least as great an impact as the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. The alternatives to a full-fledged revolution are a *coup d’etat* (in which Islamic radicals succeed in snatching power from the royal family without an accompanying social-political-religious movement), reforms which entail the gradual distribution of power away from the royal

² The need to defeat the alleged American root of the Arabian Peninsula’s problems is poetically stated: “[T]he shadow cannot be straighten [sic] when its’ [sic] source, the rod, is not straight either” (Al-Mass’ari (trans.), 1996).

³ “QAP” is an acronym used by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2004a; ICG 2004b) for “al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula”.

family into democratic-looking bodies and institutions, or preservation of the status quo. The Islamic movement which overthrew the Shah also contained a mixture of reformers and radicals. The various constituencies within the movement coalesced around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's religious ideology and succeeded in changing the existing social and political order in Iran. The thrust of this thesis is to assess whether those opposed to the current Saudi regime have the organizational potential, as in Iran, to take real political power away from the Al Saud.

B. WHY IS THIS SIGNIFICANT?

The Saudi regime's survival and continued strength is an important topic to any entity that desires a stable Middle East, such as the United States or any other industrialized nation whose economic position relies heavily on a reliable source of oil. While Saudi Arabia provides only between twelve and thirteen percent of America's oil imports (API, 2005), the desert kingdom has been for decades an important strategic partner of the United States. The fact that there are questions about the regime's durability is evident from the volume of reporting, analysis, and thoughtful opinion on the subject. People who know and study Saudi Arabia arrive at various positions along a spectrum, one end of which optimistically predicts that the regime will continue to dominate Saudi Arabia, while those at the opposite end of the spectrum are counting the days until the regime, already decaying from within, crumbles back into the desert. This thesis is not intended to reinvent the wheel in order to place one more graduate student's marker somewhere along the spectrum. Rather, this thesis offers an assessment *based on a comparison of the structures of the government and opposition* of Saudi Arabia today with the same structures present at the time of Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1978-1979, the only successful, full-fledged revolution in the Islamic world to date.

C. METHODOLOGY

1. A Survey of the Literature

In order to conduct a comparison of Khomeini's Iran and today's Saudi Arabia I have surveyed literature on three main topics: (1) the Iranian Islamic Revolution (relying heavily on Gary Sick for the American perspective, and Said Amir Arjomand for the

Iranian view); (2) current events and analysis of Saudi Arabia (from the aforementioned Doran, Baer, and Clarke, and from Gregory Gause and others who hold a more optimistic opinion); and (3) Revolutions in general (such as Guilain Denoeux's authoritative analysis of the impact of informal urban networks, *Urban Unrest in the Middle East* (1993), a more recent study by Jeff Goodwin (2001) entitled *No Other Way Out*) and a number on Islamic revolution in particular (I find Bernard Lewis' 1988 article *Islamic Revolution*, and Henry Munson's *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East* very helpful). Reviewing this and other literature reveals some relevant bases for comparison of the two countries/contexts as well as obstacles that must be overcome in order to make a credible comparison.

a. *The Iranian Islamic Revolution*⁴

The literature on the Iranian Islamic Revolution does not yield a common denominator on the precipitating cause(s) of the revolution. Most writers concur, however, on the themes which created the context of social upheaval and political instability in which the revolution occurred: widespread popular discontent and alienation as a result of the Shah's rapid modernization programs and consequent rapid economic growth and rural-urban migration; nationalist resentment of foreign domination; weakness, corruption, and repressiveness of the Pahlavi regime; Islamic revival (which coincided with the societal changes wrought by rapid modernization and migration to the cities); and Khomeini's charismatic leadership which consolidated the opposition and enabled it to exploit the regime's weaknesses.

b. *The Current Saudi Situation*

Saudi Arabia is today the subject of a great many articles, books, conferences, editorials, etc. These publications cover both external issues, i.e. Saudi Arabia as it relates to the Middle East and the international community, particularly with regard to the global oil supply; and internal, i.e. domestic politics, including the inseparable elements of Islamist movements, political reform, and social reform. These categories cannot be easily separated, however, since the Al Saud's decision-making

⁴ For readers unfamiliar with the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Gary Sick's *All Fall Down* provides a thorough account from the American national security decision-making perspective, while Said Amir Arjomand's *The Turban for the Crown* presents an in-depth account of the revolution's historical precursors, its personalities, and its aftermath.

process in the international sphere is heavily influenced by domestic public opinion (Gause, 2002, p. 2). It is equally impossible to assess the future of external issues without assuming internal stability. Thus I have chosen to first touch lightly on external issues (upon which there is substantial agreement among the writers surveyed) and then focus instead on literature relating to the Saudi monarchy, reform movements, the Wahhabi religious establishment, and Islamic radicalism within the Kingdom.

External issues are adequately summarized by the CIA World Factbook (CIA, 2005) or any good encyclopedia. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest and most influential nations of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the world's most important oil producer and exporter, and the leading member of OPEC. It has historically had the ability to single-handedly restrain the market price of oil by leveraging its oil reserves. This spare capacity, by many reports, is now shrinking as oil prices are surging to match global demand. As the cradle of Islam and the home of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia has an important role in defining Islam for millions of Muslims worldwide. In exchange for providing the royal family Islamic legitimacy, the official religious establishment (a sprawling, state-funded bureaucracy) has traditionally been permitted unfettered means to sow the Wahhabi brand of Islam both at home and abroad.

Religion is a primary example of an external issue being driven by domestic issues in Saudi Arabia. There is a substantial amount of alarmist literature which, in the wake of 9/11, vilifies the religious establishment and its influence on the education system for producing fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers. Most major U.S. newspapers have promoted such a view, but few writers have done so more elaborately than Robert Baer (2003a) in *Sleeping With the Devil*. Mr. Baer relies on his experiences and contacts as a CIA case officer in the region (although never to Saudi Arabia itself) to suggest complicity between the royal family, Al Qaeda, and the religious establishment. Less inflammatory writers on the subject do not deny troubling aspects of Wahhabism, but observe that within Saudi religious circles there are divisions among those who advocate a violent overthrow of the Al Saud to those who support a constitutional monarchy based on Islamic law, or *sharia*. Gregory Gause is among the most persuasive of these writers. On the most positive end of the spectrum, organizations such as the

Saudi-U.S. Relations Information Service emphasize “the characteristics, strength and importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship,” (SUSRIS, 2005) presenting official Saudi and U.S. statements claiming increasing and beneficial cooperation in counterterrorism efforts since 9/11, as well as the favorable opinions of notables such as Walter Lippman, Anthony Cordesman, Brad Borland, Jack Straw, and various Saudi Government Ministers.

A wide variety of opinions is also available regarding royal succession, perhaps the most difficult internal issue to ascertain because, “when it comes to family politics, “those who know don't talk, and those who talk don't know.””(Gause, 2005). Some observers, such as Michael Doran, recall the indecisiveness of official public statements after (former) King Fahd’s stroke to suggest major divisions within the royal family. Others, including Gause, note that the problems seem to have been resolved, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 Al Qaeda attacks inside the Kingdom. Baer appears to go high-and-right, perceiving that the royal family is poised to collapse at any moment and suggesting that the U.S. might, “at the very least...have to consider seizing the oil fields” (2003a, p. xxviii). While the latter view is extreme, should both King Abdullah and his designated successor, Crown Prince Sultan, die at roughly the same time and without naming an agreed-upon successor, a costly power struggle could ensue.

An alarming domestic factor which is not in dispute, however, is that Saudi Arabia faces serious demographic challenges. Its population is burgeoning: it ranks 60 of 226 in birth rate, but only 224 of 226 in death rate, ranking in the fastest 20 percent of growth rates (2.44%, compared with 0.92% in the U.S.) (CIA, 2005). A vast proportion of the population is under the age of 40, an immediate consequence of which is an unemployment rate of approximately 25 percent. Nor is Saudi civil infrastructure able to keep pace with population growth. The negative effects of such sustained patterns are currently mitigated by near-record oil prices, but Saudi Arabia’s rentier economy makes the government vulnerable to widespread discontent should oil prices plummet or should Saudi oil infrastructure become incapacitated.

c. Islamic Revolutions

There were numerous violent Islamic movements in the 1970's and '80's, including in prominent Muslim nations such as Egypt, Syria, and Iran. But most are best described as coups d'état. Only in Iran did popular unrest evolve into full-fledged revolution and the installation of an Islamic theocracy. Henry Munson, in *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East*, writes that Iran's revolution rose from conditions of widespread popular discontent, the existing government was crippled, and the presence of "opposition forces capable of articulating popular grievances and mobilizing political action" (p. ix). Munson's analysis leads to perhaps the most significant point, made repeatedly in the literature surveyed for this paper: despite the rhetoric, Islamic revolutions, whether fomented by radicals and reformers, are essentially political, not religious, in nature. The point is made more directly by Bernard Lewis (1988):

As the Ayatollah Khomeini has reminded us, Muhammad exercised the normal functions of a head of state—he dispensed justice, he raised taxes, he promulgated laws, he made war, he made peace. In other words, from the very beginning, in the sacred biography of its Prophet, in its earliest history enshrined in scripture and tradition, Islam as a religion has been associated with the exercise of power. Again to quote Khomeini: "Islam is politics or it is nothing.

The distinction between radicals and reformers is not one of kind, but rather of degree, in that both types of movements seek to change the existing political order, might be nationalistic or not (Khomeini vs. Pakistan's Zia al-Haqq in 1977, for example), and are often internally divided (Munson, c1988, pp 4-5). The degree, then, refers to the movement's willingness and propensity to use violence, on one end of the spectrum, or to join the political mainstream on the other.

Revolutionaries, or radicals, and reformers do tend to differ, nevertheless. Revolutionaries tend to emphasize foreign domination (a heavily featured complaint in pre-revolution Iran), while reformers typically place heavier emphasis on conformity to Islamic law. The former often have vitriolic relations with the United States, while the latter often have good relations with America (e.g. Pakistan and Egypt). Revolutionaries tend to be supported by Iran (e.g. Lebanese Hezbollah), and predominantly Shi'a, while reformers are more likely to be supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia (Munson, c1988, pp 6).

The trends are not mutually exclusive, however—Al Qaeda seems to incorporate themes from both ends of the spectrum. Bin Laden’s rhetoric emphasizes both foreign domination (of Islam by the West) and conformity with Islamic law, is rabidly anti-American yet, according to numerous sources, relies on Saudi financiers and recruits.

Arjomand addresses Islamic revolution in the context of the Iranian experience. He quotes Crane Brinton to emphasize the point that, “Modern revolutions occur not in stagnant societies, but in those undergoing considerable social change” (1988, p. 4). Arjomand also notes that while a number of factors combined to *create* a revolutionary opportunity, the *direction* of the revolution was determined by Islamic ideology (1988, p. 5).

Applying Jeff Goodwin’s theory in *No Other Way Out* to the comparison of Iran and Saudi Arabia, one comes away with the idea that where Iran experienced a radical revolution which fundamentally transformed important institutions of the Iranian state (p. 10), Saudi Arabia may well experience a non-radical revolution, a “conservative revolutionary movement” which “seeks state power but which also wishes...to preserve or at most to moderately reform existing economic social, and cultural arrangements, without changing them fundamentally” (p. 11).

Gary Sick (1993) suggests that, “The absence of vigor and visible progress is one of the root causes of the Islamic uprising. When governments function well, radical movements gravitate to the fringes of politics; but when governments are perceived as corrupt and inept, drastic solutions become more attractive” (p. 19).

While there is no consensus on root causes among the literature surveyed on Islamic revolutions, there is general agreement that the movements are political in nature, but rely on Islam for a compelling ideology. This agreement will be important when examining the opposition structures of Iran and Saudi Arabia in more detail in Chapter II.

2. Compare and Contrast: Bases for Comparison

Despite possible objections to a comparison of two countries as different as Iran and Saudi Arabia, there are four substantial bases for comparing the two: (1) Iran

experienced the only full-fledged Islamic revolution; (2) revolution is underpinned by social unrest whose sources lend themselves easily to comparison; (3) the two countries are/were regional heavyweights and important to U.S. security policy; and (4) a major challenge to the ruling regime is/was the question of legitimacy.

a. Only in Iran

“There have been several movements called revolutionary in the lands of Islam in [the 20th] century,” according to Bernard Lewis (1988, p. 2), but only in Iran was it a revolution in the classic sense, “a mass movement with wide popular participation that resulted in a major shift in economic as well as political power, and that...continued a process of vast social transformation.” While the current state of Iran may be uninspiring to today’s Muslim revolutionaries, elements of the ideology which Khomeini employed in 1978-9 still resonate in the Muslim world today, regardless of sectarian division. Moreover, the Iranian case offers the only case in which a charismatic figure successfully appealed to and mobilized every stratum of an Islamic society. UBL has stated his intention of overthrowing the Al Saud, using many of the same arguments as Khomeini. So, “Although the Iranian experience cannot be used to predict what might happen in other countries, it may provide some useful clues. Perhaps the most significant lesson that can be drawn from Iran’s 14-year experiment is that Islam as a religion appears to be less important than Islam as a political virus” (Sick, 1993).

Secular revolutions outside the Middle East can provide useful insight into the social and political revolutionary undercurrents in Saudi Arabia today, but besides several examples of *coups d’etat*, there is not another revolution which contained the specifically Muslim symbols and slogans besides the Iranian case. As Bernard Lewis (1988, p. 7) comments, “In fourteen centuries of Islamic history there have been many opposition movements within Islam. Almost all of them and certainly all those of any significance were religiously expressed. Opposition to the prevailing order, criticism of an existing regime, found expression in religious terms just as the prevailing regime defined its authority and its legitimacy in religious terms.” Saudi Arabia is today, as was the Shah in 1978, confronted with an opponent who bases his determination to overthrow the regime on Islam.

b. Revolutionary Underpinnings

The purpose of this thesis, again, is to evaluate Saudi Arabia's susceptibility to revolution. As previously stated, even revolutions outside the Middle East still have some bearing on the current Saudi situation because revolution, whatever its religious or ideological bent, is still and always a social and political movement. Iran is no exception, and it is as fair to compare one revolution, Islamic or not, to another as it is to compare two football teams, two political parties, or two militaries.

c. Regional Heavyweights

It would be unfair to compare Iran in the 1970s with, say, Honduras, or even Pakistan, in the context of U.S. interests. President Nixon had made Iran the lynchpin of U.S. security policy in the Middle East (Sick, 1985, pp. 18, 20). Iran was useful to the United States economically, as a regional tension reducer, as a counterinsurgency partner (in Oman), as a reliable oil supplier to the West in general, and as Israel's primary source of oil. Iran also shared a 1,600 mile border with the Soviet Union and controlled the Straits of Hormuz, making Iran extremely valuable geographically as a strategic ally (Bill, 1988, pp. 16, 17). Saudi Arabia is at least as important to the United State's interests today as Iran was in the 1970s. This is demonstrable in economic terms, particularly with respect to the stability of the global oil market. The Saudis have provided essential security assistance, providing bases during the Gulf War of 1990-91 and throughout the period of Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. Saudi Arabia is becoming a more active strategic counterterrorism partner as well (although this cooperation has largely coincided with the incidence of terrorism on Saudi soil since 2003). Perhaps the most important point to make with respect to the contextual comparability is that the U.S. has provided an international safety net for Saudi Arabia for decades. A similar U.S. commitment to the Shah was ultimately a factor in his demise as Khomeini successfully painted the Shah not only as a puppet, but as the Great Satan's puppet. As Munson (1988, p. 127) argues, "The aura of invincibility that had surrounded the shah, *as well as much of the hostility toward him*, was due in large part to the conviction that he was Washington's man and that the United States would never tolerate his demise. Once that conviction was shaken, so were the foundations of the shah's regime." Munson adds that in the context of the Carter Administration's fault-

finding Human Rights policy toward Iran, “If Iranians had not perceived their king to be an American puppet, much of their hostility toward him would not have existed, and a perceived dilution of American support could not have precipitated his overthrow” (p. 128). If the Saudi regime is similarly viewed among Saudis as “Washington’s men”, then American criticism of the Al Saud has the potential to undermine the regime’s strength.

d. Legitimacy

The Shah made only token efforts to present himself under a mantle of Islamic piety, and experienced a crisis of legitimacy as his modernization programs began to erode the societal base of his country. Khomeini successfully stripped him of his legitimacy by persuading Iranians that the Shah had lost his Muslim identity and was corrupting Iran by non-Muslim behavior. The Saudi royal family is likewise beginning to hear an increasing volume of rhetoric from Islamist opponents about the family’s Islamic credentials. Some princes are well known for their personal moral corruption, and the regime as a whole is open to criticism for maintaining economic and political ties with the West which violate a narrow interpretation of Islam. A political principle which applies to both Iran and Saudi Arabia is that, “Power seeks legitimacy, and attains it more effectively, among Muslims, from Islam rather than from national or patriotic or even dynastic claims, still less from the Western notion of national or popular sovereignty” (Lewis, 1988, p. 4).

The preceding factors of legitimacy, the two countries’ strategic importance and relationship with the United States, and Iran’s singular experience of Islamic revolution combine to justify a comparison of Iranian and Saudi opposition (and counter-opposition) structures.

3. Compare and Contrast: Obstacles to Overcome

While a justifiable base for comparison exists, no two countries are homogenous. The basic question at the outset is whether the context in which the Iranian Islamic Revolution occurred makes that revolution un-comparable to Saudi Arabia’s current situation. What, then, are the difficulties to be addressed in order to plausibly apply the Iranian context to the Saudi Arabian? There are three obvious objections which must be overcome in order to begin a credible comparison: (1) Religious difference—most Saudis

are Sunni, most Iranians are Shi'i; (2) Ethnic difference—Saudis are Arab, Iranians are Persian; and (3) Time difference—The international playing field has changed considerably since 1979. A discussion of these three should reveal not only *how* the two contexts differ, but also *what* to be mindful of when making a comparison in which events that happened in Iran may not be *directly* applicable to Saudi Arabia.

a. Religious Differences: Sunni and Shi'a.

Saudis and Sunnis generally adhere to different Islamic sects: Iranians are predominantly Shi'i; Saudis are predominantly Sunni. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and the Saudi royal family is considered to be the custodian of Islam's most holy places, Mecca and Medina. "The constitution of the kingdom remains the Quran, though for all intents and purposes the "basic system" [of government, promulgated by the king in 1992] is the functional equivalent of a constitution. Long before the Iranian Revolution...the Saudis have contended that theirs is the model "Islamic State" (Gause, 1994, p. 29). Although Shi'ites adhere to the same five pillars of Islam as Sunnis, including the *hajj* to Mecca, Iran's Shi'i religious hierarchy lays claim to Islamic authority and historical importance. As late as the Constitutional Revolution in 1905 Iranians held that "the [Iranian] ruler was yet 'the King of Islam' and of the Shi'ite nation" (Arjomand, 1988, p. 79). The two views about Islam's custody are indeed incompatible, but Gregory Gause (1994, p. 32) says, "Islam is a contested concept in the political realm, as the ideological competition between Saudi Arabia and revolutionary Iran demonstrates." The question at hand, however, is whether any sectarian differences preclude a meaningful comparison of the Iranian and Saudi political contexts. In other words, did the Iranian Islamic Revolution occur *only* because Shi'ites are somehow more prone to revolution than Sunnis?

Three significant differences do exist which pertain to this discussion. First, as described by Said Amir Arjomand (1988, p. 75): "The most important feature distinguishing Shi'ite from Sunni Islam since the end of the eighteenth century is the separation of political and religious authority, and the corresponding autonomy of the religious institution from the state." This is important because, as Arjomand continues, "Modernization and the expansion of the power of the state was, sooner or later, bound to

entail restriction of hierocratic power” (p. 77). In Saudi Arabia the Sunni religious establishment is not separate from the government, and so does not compete with the monarchy for political authority in the same way as the Iranian hierocracy. Nevertheless, “Movement from the rural periphery into urban centers has...been historically associated with increasing religious orthodoxy and a more rigorous adherence to the legalistic and puritanical central tradition of Islam” (Gellner, 1981, as quoted by Arjomand, 1988, p. 91). Saudi Arabia’s demographic problems (including a burgeoning urban population) seem bound to create the kind social disruptions from which Saudis are likely to seek relief in Islam unless alternative forms of political expression are introduced.

Henry Munson (1994, p. 131) identifies the second and third uniquely Shi’ite factors upon which Ayatollah Khomeini was able to capitalize. Second are the writings of Dr. Ali Shari’ati (1933 - 1977), the principal theorist of the left wing of Iran’s Islamic movement in the 70’s, emphasized the revolutionary character of Shi’i Islam. Thirdly, Khomeini accrued more authority than any Sunni religious leader could expect because “most Shi’ites believe [leading Ayatollahs] are the sacred representatives of the messianic hidden imam.” Said Amir Arjomand (1988, p. 99) supports this assertion in discussing the ideology that Khomeini developed and spread: “Certain specific features of Shi’ite Islam were highly suitable for the mobilization of the masses...Islamic government had to be linked in many ways with powerful images. Such images were drawn from the Shi’ite theodicy of suffering...”

Although these facets of Shi’ism *enabled* the revolution, it would nevertheless be wrong to believe that these factors alone were *causal*—the Iranian example, after all, occurred within a complex socio-political environment. Moreover, the fact that Usama bin Laden, a Sunni, has mobilized support and/or sympathy from Muslims around the world using an ideology rich with imagery of “the prophet as revolutionary” suggests that either the phenomenon is *not* uniquely Shi’ite, or that he is co-opting elements of Khomeini’s ideology.

Are Shi’ites therefore *inherently* more inclined than Sunnis to revolution or radicalism? While both Saudi Arabia and Iran have encouraged Islamic movements abroad, “those supported by Saudi Arabia are invariably Sunni as well as non-

revolutionary” (Munson 1988, p. 6), whereas the movements Iran has supported are not only predominantly (but not exclusively) Shi’i but also radical rather than reformist. But while it is clear that Ayatollah Khomeini led a revolutionary movement which successfully sought to overthrow the existing form of government in order to establish a new order (i.e. a revolution), there were in the movement both Shi’ite reformers and radicals. The point here is that Islamic movements, like most political movements, contain elements and sub-groups whose ideologies vary along a spectrum that lies between reform and revolution. The mainstream opposition to the Saudi form of government seems to have in mind not a revolution but reforms leading to greater political participation and civil liberties within the confines of Islamic law. Gregory Gause (1994, p. 101), a well-known commentator on Gulf and Middle Eastern affairs, commenting on Saudi petitions for reform in the early 1990s, says, “none of these petitions questioned the basis of the political system...All expressed support for the ruling families, even when calling for limits on their powers. None advocated the kind of radical change that Arab nationalist groups called for in past decades...” More than a decade after Gause’s comments Saudis are now experiencing a degree of reform with municipal elections, but Usama bin Laden and Al Qaeda appear to be simultaneously promoting a more revolutionary agenda with support from many Saudi sympathizers.

Religious themes clearly affect the character and structure of the Islamic movements, which will be further explored in Chapter II. But the Sunni-Shi’a religious difference between Saudis and Iranians need not preclude a comparison of the two situations. The differences merely add texture to the comparison of Khomeini’s Iran with today’s Saudi Arabia, rather than invalidating it.

b. Social / Ethnic Differences: Arabs and Persians

If religion is an insufficient reason to dismiss the comparison, then what about ethnicity? The essential question here is whether there was a factor of the Iranian revolution which can be attributed to Persian history, language, culture which would render invalid a comparison with an Arab social/political context. One might leap to the conclusion that, since Persians and Arabs have been fighting each other for centuries, and since Persians and Arabs use the contemptuous terms “mouse-eaters” and “lizard eaters”

to describe each other respectively (Halliday, 1996), their two cultures and socio-political contexts make an effective comparison impossible. Fred Halliday (1996), writing for CERI, the French Center for International Studies and Research, records that in fact, “Language, religion, pilgrimage, migration, trade have tied the regions of both peoples together for all of history. For much of the time they have lived in peace, not war...Within what is today the Arab domains there have always been communities with Iranian characteristics...On the Iranian side, script, vocabulary and religion are all of Arab origin.” He goes on to say, “If one ventures into the difficult and often tendentious domain of racial characteristics, the situation is clear enough: the faces, physical characteristics, body language in Baghdad and Basra differ little if at all from those in Tehran and Isfahan. The ‘we’ and the ‘they’ are not given by history but are the products of specific, often conscious, political interventions.” Clearly, then, there are differences between Persians and Arabs, but also an abundance of common ground. It would therefore be naïve to suggest that since the Iranian Islamic Revolution was conducted by Persians it has no applicability in an Arabic context.

c. Different Times: That was Then, This is Now

The Iranian Islamic Revolution culminated in 1979. The United States and the Soviet Union were vying for dominance around the globe; the power of oil had been recently demonstrated in the energy crisis of the late 1970s; Iran led the contest for regional dominance among Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; and President Nixon had vested U.S. Cold War security policy *vis a vis* the Middle East in Iran’s Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Times have certainly changed: the dominant global contest today is no longer between American and Soviet superpowers but rather the so-called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT); Iraq’s Shi’ites are ascendant while Iran has faded into a pariah state, leaving Saudi Arabia as the most powerful (certainly economically, if not militarily) of the three rivals; and the U.S. now has a much larger footprint in the Middle East. Once again, the question to be asked is whether any of this precludes a meaningful comparison of revolutionary Iran with today’s Saudi Arabia. A later portion of this paper will go into more detail about the similarities and differences between the two contexts, but for now suffice to say that if care is taken to acknowledge particular areas of difficulty when comparing the two countries, there is no good reason to expect that no observation about

the conditions leading up to the Iranian Islamic Revolution can be applied to Saudi Arabia's current situation simply because times have changed. The same is true of the obvious religious and ethnic differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially keeping in mind that the focus of this paper is on the structure of the opposition.

D. SUMMARY

To summarize this chapter, the principle objective of this study was to determine whether, as some vocal commentators declare, Saudi Arabia is under the kind of threat which resulted in the dramatic overthrow of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi during the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Lessons from the latter may be applied to Saudi Arabia today in order first to understand the respective Saudi and Iranian political contexts, and then to prevent the possibility of an Islamic revolution in Saudi Arabia from taking the United States by surprise. To arrive at my conclusion that the Saudi ruling family, given its strong integration with Saudi society, is not vulnerable in the near term to an Iranian-style revolt, I began by acknowledging and overcome the obvious sectarian, ethnic, and timeframe differences between the two situations. I then establish that they are nevertheless comparable. In Chapter II I proceed with a detailed comparison of the structures of the Iranian and Saudi opposition, and in Chapter III I conduct a similar comparison of the respective regime structures.

II. THE OPPOSITION

This chapter describes the Iranian opposition to Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime, and compares it with the opposition in Saudi Arabia today in order to determine whether any of the disparate social and/or political forces and organizations in Saudi Arabia present a similar threat to the Al Saud, and if not, to assess whether there is a discernible ideology, personality, or cause around which the Saudi opposition might coalesce into a force capable of mounting a true threat to the Al Saud. Bernard Lewis, a respected Middle East historian, writes:

In fourteen centuries of Islamic history there have been many opposition movements within Islam. Almost all of them and certainly all those of any significance were religiously expressed. Opposition to the prevailing order, criticism of an existing regime, found expression in religious terms just as the prevailing regime defined its authority and its legitimacy in religious terms. To confront a religious regime, one needed a religious challenge (Lewis, 1988, p. 7).

Iranian population's grievances against the shah, both sociocultural and materialistic, were indeed cloaked in the language and symbols of Islam. In Saudi Arabia, likewise, Islamic rhetoric and the expression of material grievances are indistinguishable. It is my intent herein to demonstrate that the Iranian opposition was well integrated with Iranians through well established, but informal, urban networks. These networks were the channels through which Khomeini orchestrated the Islamic Revolution against the Shah's regime. Little is known (or at least published) about informal urban networks in Saudi Arabia—a significant finding in itself. What is known, however, is that the Saudi opposition is fragmented among loyal reformists and violent jihadists. The latter, although receiving the most media attention, are only weakly integrated with society and are marginalized among ordinary Saudis. I analyze both scenarios (without ignoring the social, political, and religious contexts) in terms of the formal and informal organizational structures within which the respective opposition movements and regimes act(ed).

A. THE IRANIAN OPPOSITION

The Shah negated formal political organizations opposed to his regime using modern instruments of the state (SAVAK, the bureaucracy, and the army) but neglected to forge connections between his regime and informal power centers. The shah was thus unable to suppress the forces for change which found expression through informal networks. Fred Halliday (1979, p. 212), writing in 1978 as the Iranian Revolution neared its climax, distinguished between opposition *forces*, and opposition *organizations*, writing that while the motivations of the various demonstrators were diverse, “the strength and activity of opposition *organizations* in Iran must under existing conditions be rather small, but, as 1978 showed, the grounds for opposition, and hence the opposition *forces* that exist fermenting below the surface, are very large.” It should be noted here that implicit with the notion of opposition forces is some form of organization, but in an authoritarian regime this organization tends to be informal, not institutionalized in political parties, unions, or other formal political organizations.

A brief mention of the formal Iranian opposition organizations, however weak they may have been, is warranted here. Three groupings existed in Iran: National groups, guerrilla groups, and traditional opposition organizations. *National groups* such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, the Front for the Liberation of the Arab areas of Iran, the Revolutionary Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Arabestan, and the Baluchistan People’s League had petitioned or fought the government for either independence or autonomy, but by 1978 none were a credible threat to the regime, nor capable of organizing larger scale opposition (Halliday, 1979, pp. 226-27).

Guerrilla groups, the Organization of the Iranian People’s Fedayin Guerrillas, and Organization of the People’s Combatants (commonly known as the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and ‘the Fedayin’ respectively) were not influential in the 1978 movement because they “operated under conditions of extreme clandestineness and difficulty. Neither organization had any ties to existing mass political organizations when they began, and it has not proved possible for them to build any such organizations... the guerrillas have remained virtually isolated from the population in whose name they claim to be acting”

(Halliday, 1979, pp. 236-39). Individual members of both organizations almost certainly participated in the riots and demonstrations, but there was not a significant organizational contribution.

Traditional opposition organizations in 1978 were limited to the National Front and the Tudeh Party. The National Front, whose main demand was the restoration of constitutional government, could not easily provide the basis for real opposition because it was “never a proper political organization, but was rather a coalition of different factions within the parliament, [nor did it have] the organizational capacity to survive under conditions of dictatorship” (Halliday, 1979, p. 226). Tudeh, the Iranian communist party, was much more organized, but was popularly perceived as Moscow’s toady. Worse, since it was thoroughly penetrated by SAVAK and its leaders operated from exile, the party suffered the “widespread belief that Tudeh was an unreliable section of the opposition...[and] the most common accusation is that the Tudeh leadership are ‘traitors’ because they have left Iran” (Halliday, 1979, p. 232). This explains the weakness of Iranian opposition organizations, but how does one explain the manifestation of the latent power of the opposition forces as 1978 progressed? Clearly hundreds of thousands of demonstrators do not spontaneously appear in a city’s streets—there must be *some* organization, if not orchestration, which directs the passions of an aroused populace.

The structure of the Iranian opposition as the revolution gained momentum in 1978 was difficult for both foreigners and Iranians to clearly identify or explain: “...most observers and many participants did not make much headway in comprehending the unfolding revolution in Iran, a revolution that was neither “bourgeois” nor “proletarian” and whose slogans emphasized neither democracy nor progress...” (Arjomand, 1988, p. 4). Additionally, it was not at all clear at the time that Khomeini and the clerics would, or even could, be the key actors in harnessing the disparate social forces. Gary Sick (1985) recalls that the outcome of the disturbances in 1978 was never as inevitable as it now seems—the Shah was in command of a large army, a substantial treasury, and a legendary secret police (SAVAK); had powerful friends abroad; and had weathered similar-appearing crises before during his thirty-seven years in power. The opposition,

on the other hand, was “an aged cleric who had fulminated against the shah from exile for 14 years to no avail and a congeries of aging Mosaddeghists, village ecclesiastics and disgruntled job seekers” (Sick, 1985, p. 41). The following paragraphs will show that the Shah was indeed well equipped to control formal opposition groups, but that he misjudged the source of true opposition force—the informal urban networks manipulated by Khomeini’s associates—over which the shah had no control.

Even if the nature of the opposition movement *had* been apparent, the repressive nature of the Iranian regime made it difficult at the time to discern a clear picture of the opposition, “As with so much else in Iran, it is not only that there may be much that we do not hear about; it may also be that what we do hear about as having happened never did so, or at least not in the way it is claimed” (Halliday, 1979, p. 212). Nevertheless, Halliday went on to observe that by 1978, “a vocal and sustained opposition became evident, with protests by writers, lawyers and politicians about restrictions on freedom, widespread student demonstrations on campuses, and in March 1978 a prolonged hunger strike by political prisoners in Evin jail. Beyond these incidents there unfolded a mass opposition in over thirty towns.”

The informal networks in which opposition forces found their loudest voice were a specifically urban phenomenon. Although the rural poor and nomads had historically presented occasional problems for the Shah’s regime, by 1978 they were a negligible factor. The rural poor had anyway been becoming the urban poor throughout the 1970s, due to massive rural-urban migration. Nomads, likewise, had decreased to only five percent of the Iranian population. Groups of Kurdish, Arab, and Baluchi nationalities also overlapped with the rural poor and nomads, and were not an independent opposition force of consequence. The rural poor, according to Halliday (1979, pp. 213, 214), assumed a passive form of opposition and remained “relatively isolated from other political influences.” The outside influences to which the rural poor *were* subjected tended to be those chosen by the state.

The *urban* poor, on the other hand, were a large and critical component of the informal networks to be discussed below, and thus became, eventually, a potent political force. As Halliday (1979, pp. 297-8) surveyed the Iranian political scene in late 1978, he

concluded that, “The most important question concerns the character of the hundreds of thousands of people who demonstrated in Tehran and other cities. These were the urban poor...They were joined in their protests by the merchants of the bazaar, who were traditionally close to the mosque...[The movement] was not in any proper sense of the word ‘religious’. Its complaints and demands were eminently materialist. But it did follow the religious leaders and phrase some of its demands in an Islamic form for want of any other alternative.”⁵ This observation suggests the importance of the bazaar and the mosque in explaining the earlier question of how the potential opposition forces became manifest. The organizational power of the bazaar and mosque is addressed in an excellent study of informal urban networks in the Middle East by Guilain Denoeux, upon which I will rely heavily to describe the real power of the Iranian opposition. From there I proceed to apply Denoeux’s ideas about the ability of urban networks to either stabilize or destabilize a regime to the current Saudi situation explain.

By the 1970s, formal Iranian opposition organizations had been effectively repressed by the Shah, so that “on the eve of the revolution, while there was considerable hatred of the shah, there also existed no formally organized group in a position to challenge his regime” (Denoeux, 1993, p. 90). The Iranian opposition must, therefore, have been informal. Denoeux explains further that informal networks are an enduring characteristic of the Middle East’s authoritarian regimes: “[I]nformal networks remain potent bases from which to organize political dissent...because the absence of formal channels to express opposition to the government often has turned informally organized associations into the most readily available vehicles for the airing of grievances.” And, “even when [formal organizations] have been allowed, their ability to recruit and mobilize has been seriously impeded by the state’s ability to coopt or coerce social forces

5 Some would argue with Halliday over the importance of true religious feeling to the success of the revolution. Denoeux (p.208) agrees that “...Islam has sometimes provided the ready-made ideology that has been able to unify a multiplicity of informal networks—even, once again, when these groups originally appeared as a result of concerns and forces that are neither religious nor specific to Arab-Muslim culture (e.g., the quest for identity and cultural authenticity, the resentment of foreign domination and Western cultural influences...)” but emphasizes that “Khomeini and the militant ulama grouped around him were primarily concerned with the preservation of the cultural and moral foundations of the traditional order. They wanted first and foremost to preserve the Islamic character of Islamic society, under a state that would publicly acknowledge the contribution of clerics and religion to a healthy society and try to uphold the social status of the ulama as the official guardians of the Shi’ite traditions” (Tabari, as referenced by Denoeux, p.181).

through the distribution of patronage and the threat to use force.” How, then, does one describe Iran’s informal networks, especially their mobilization during the revolution?

Using Denoeux’s definition, a network refers to “groups of individuals linked to one another by highly personal, non-contractual bonds and loyalties” (p. 3). Denoeux identifies two (overlapping) types of informal networks. Patron-Client, or clientelist, networks entail informal ties from ruling elites to the population via intermediaries such as *ulama*⁶, *bazaaris*⁷, leaders of urban quarters and Sufi orders—these networks provide important channels of communication between the regime and the population. The second type of informal network is independent of the governing elite, consisting of voluntary associations based on quarter, kinship, religious, and occupational affiliations (Denoeux, 1993, p. 34).

A patron in a clientelist network is one who acts as a broker and/or mediator between the regime and the population. Patrons have some standing in a given segment of the population, and deliver that population’s cooperation to the ruling elites in exchange for power, position, or money. These clientelist networks usually promote stability for two reasons. First, everyone benefits: the regime controls the population, the patron earns position or money, and the clients receive protection from outside forces, an avenue to express grievances, and civil services. Second, the regime maintains a monopoly of force, and both patrons and clients are aware that the regime will not hesitate to crack down if threatened (Denoeux, p. 36). This suggests limits on clientelism’s utility in ensuring civil order. Denoeux notes that there were always marginalized elements of the population over whom patrons had no control or influence. Central authorities were also sometimes unable to respond appropriately to the legitimate demands or protests of clients, either because protest via the notables was too cumbersome to solve urgent protests, or because the central authority was too weak or divided to respond to the demand (Denoeux, pp. 50, 53).

Clientelist networks have a long history in Iran. The Qajar dynasty controlled urban populations in nineteenth century Iran by relying on key individuals, known as

⁶*Ulama* translates roughly to “Islamic religious leaders” collectively.

⁷ *Bazaari* translates roughly to “wealthy merchants”

“notables”: judges, Friday prayer leaders, presidents of the religious courts and chief religious officials of the cities, ‘mayors’, guild leaders, district leaders. One can observe in the preceding list of typical patrons the overlap between clientelist networks and occupational, religious, and residential networks. The Qajars, ruling into the early twentieth century with a weaker central government, had neither a standing army nor a large administrative bureaucracy upon which to base its power. It relied instead “on the readiness of the magnates, the ulama...the judges, and the guild masters to enforce the shah’s will, and the disposition of the subjects to submit to his authority...Whole livelihoods depended on the gifts, pensions, jobs, offices, and salaries upon which the network of Qajar patronage rested” (Abrahamian, as quoted by Denoeux, 1993, p. 39). By the 1950s the modernization of Iran under the first Pahlavi shah had created in Iranian cities a new social strata—the modern middle class, the intelligentsia, and the industrial working class. Mass-based political parties and unions became “the primary vehicles for the political mobilization of these new...segments of the Iranian population” (Denoeux, p. 89). But, as previously stated, by the 1970s these political bodies were repressed, controlled, or co-opted by the state, leaving informal networks as the sole vehicle for political expression for ordinary Iranians. These informal networks, however, proved not always to be stabilizing mechanisms.

Denoeux (p. 53) discerns three conditions under which networks typically become destabilizing. First, if a weakening (by internal division, military defeat, policy failure, etc.) regime is no longer able to keep its end of the bargain by providing favors to the patrons and security to the population, the regime becomes an unattractive partner for the notables. This effect is magnified where notables have independent resources. Second, clients will exert pressure on local leaders to become involved on their side if the government threatens the interests of substantial segments of the urban population. Third, informal urban networks can quickly become destabilizing if the notables themselves feel their interests and powers threatened by a regime’s policies or “the emergence of alternative sources of patronage that threatened to attract their clienteles.” In the 1960s and 1970s the shah introduced well intentioned policies aimed at modernizing Iran, but which threatened both the material and cultural interests of large

portions of Iran's rapidly growing urban population, and simultaneously curbed the traditional interest and powers of Iran's clientelist brokers, the Shi'ite clerics and the bazaaris.

Before expanding on revolutionary Iran's informal urban networks, the role of residential networks to the Iranian revolution should be briefly mentioned. Prior to the explosive urban growth in Iran in the latter half of the twentieth century, Iranian cities (like other Middle Eastern cities) were informally segregated in quarters based on shared ethnic or religious identity. Within these myriad quarters neighborhood solidarities naturally developed and the government appointed informal leaders who acted in many ways as agents of the state. Solidarities engaged in welfare and civic activities within their residential quarter and mobilized to defend their interests against other quarters. With the growth of the bureaucratic state, however, "government agencies now perform such tasks as the resolution of disputes, the maintenance of law and order, the levying of taxes, and the management of public services, which once were fulfilled by informal leaders of quarters,...by quarter-based youth groups,...or by other informally organized associations based on residential affiliations" (Denoeux, p. 69). Thus, while some remnant of the residential network remained by the late 1970s, these affiliations paled in significance compared to the informal networks of the intelligentsia, mosque, and bazaar.

1. Bazaar Network

The Iranian bazaar was capable of acting as an opposition force because it was a self-contained community in which shared interests and interpersonal bonds fostered a strong sense of collective identity. This was a stabilizing force for the hundreds of thousands of rural migrants, but also a potentially (and eventually) destabilizing force when the bazaar's collective identity and shared interests were threatened.

A description of the typical Iranian bazaar is helpful for understanding how the bazaar network could possibly be a major factor in a political opposition movement.

The bazaar has always been a pillar of civic foundations. No town could survive without a bazaar—whether big or small. Some have...described [the] bazaar as the economic heartbeat of the Iranian cities. The ancient

Iranian bazaars have gradually evolved into an encompassing section of the town. A bazaar was not a secluded section of the town, but home to...a central emporium surrounded by several smaller bazaars and arcades (ICCIM, 2005).

Furthermore, “the cultural and social aspects of the bazaar support the smooth transmission of information within the bazaar. The restaurants, tea houses, gymnasiums, and bathhouses are places in the bazaar where people meet and exchange information. The bazaar population participates in socio-religious events and festivals and the social aspects of the bazaar are particularly apparent in the joint prayers of traders in mosques, many of which are in or near the bazaar. In addition to daily prayer, the bazaar community participates in the weekly religious gatherings. The social and cultural aspects of the bazaar form the basis for the mass communication networks. “It is through these interpersonal networks and the participation of the same individuals in several different gathering during the week that bazaar information, ideas, and rumors are passed on (Thaiss, 1971, 189)”” (Gahadassi, 2005). The bazaar network fostered what Denoeux (p. 141) calls a distinct subculture, characterized by, “the existence of dense and overlapping social networks within the bazaar [and also] norms, habits, values, codes of behavior, and rules of conduct specific to the bazaar.”

The bazaar community was nevertheless stratified, containing an upper class of big merchants and money lenders, followed by a tier of wholesalers and middle-rank merchants, “followed by the smaller shopkeepers and craftsmen, who formed the majority of the bazaari community. Below the shopkeepers and independent craftsmen, the lower echelons of the bazaar were represented by wage earners...followed by those, at the very bottom of the bazaari hierarchy, who were engaged [as] carwashers, peddlers, street vendors, hawkers, and the like” (Denoeux, pp. 139-40). The bazaar was not politically homogenous either. Loyalties varied, with a minority of the upper stratum supporting the regime, a larger minority backing the radical lower clergy, and the majority with either no political allegiance, ties to the National Front, or associated with the moderate higher clergy (Denoeux, p. 140). The bazaar community nevertheless “continued to share a sense of collective identity. What defines a *bazaari*, in fact, is not only his physical location in the bazaar, but also his membership in a distinct community

of like-minded individuals bent on preserving the bazaar's relative independence and autonomy against encroachment by outside forces. Perhaps more than any other factors, it is this sense of collective identity that has enabled the *bazaaris* to transcend their divisions at critical junctures" (Denoeux, p. 140). The bazaar thus maintained its coherence as a political force despite these divisions and the trials of modernization.

Prior to the bulk of the shah's modernization efforts, leading bazaaris acted as patrons, providing a stabilizing link between the ruling elite and the lower classes in the bazaar community. This role was diminished as the physical expansion of Iranian cities and modern industry brought the central government and the bazaar into conflict. Mass-produced goods and imports, which were sold outside the bazaar in new shops outside the bazaar, reduced the bazaar's relative power. These new shops and products were popular with the new middle class, but the bazaar was still "dominant in retail trade, handicraft production, and small-scale manufacturing" and remained "the prime shopping area and a vital arena of sociability for the lower- and middle-classes" (Denoeux, pp. 138-9). Modernization also witnessed various attempts by the regime to destroy the physical integrity of the bazaars with construction or road building⁸ projects. The bazaar retained its communal strength for several reasons. First, the shah had repressed leftist organizations who might have taken advantage of the social and political differences within the community. Second, every stratum and group had an economic stake in the bazaar's survival as an institution. Third, the very proximity of bazaaris to one another produced not only friction but also an intimate unity against perceived outsiders. The physical separation of the bazaar from urban society reinforced this "us vs. them" attitude. Finally, interpersonal bonds cut across all political, social, and income strata. These cross-cutting ties facilitated communication which occurred informally through shared membership in guilds, brotherhoods, gymnasiums, and Sufi houses of worship. "Restaurants, coffeehouses and teahouses functioned as meeting places and informal headquarters..." (Denoeux, p. 141). Thus, despite the challenges of rapid urbanization and modernization to the bazaar's sustained significance a substantial amount of

⁸ The bazaar of Mashhad was razed to create a green space, and plans were announced to bisect the main bazaar in Tehran to make room for a freeway (Munson, p.116, Denoeux, p.146).

commercial activity continued to pass through channels controlled by bazaaris, and the bazaar remained one of Iran's largest employers (Denoeux, p. 139).

The enduring importance of the bazaar meant also that the cross-cutting lines of communication remained largely intact. Whereas the destabilizing aspect of the network in earlier times had occasionally manifested itself through simple collective activity such as temporarily shutting down the bazaar to protest government decisions perceived as arbitrary or harmful to bazaaris' interests, the same commercial networks and contacts later provided lines of communication which aided coordination and organization of the massive demonstrations which eventually transformed Iran's informal religious networks into the revolutionary government of the Islamic Republic.

The facts of the bazaar's interconnectedness, collective identity, and political force seem clear. The actual social mechanisms which brought the fact about, though, have not yet been detailed here. Patronage ties existed within the bazaar, expressed, for example, by an upper level bazaari lending money to smaller shopkeepers and craftsmen. Similarly, the hawkers and carwashers in the outer orbits of the bazaar owed their livelihood to it and were easily mobilized to defend the interests of ranking bazaaris. Merchants and guild leaders also gathered at noon and in the early evening at the main bazaar mosque for congregational prayers, which provided an opportunity to trade rumors, news, and opinions.

The most significant collective activity, however, was perhaps the weekly informal religious gatherings referenced earlier by Gahadassi, known as *hay'at-e senifs*. These ulama-led meetings promoted a sense of solidarity in various ways. These meetings frequently became the scene for bazaaris to decide ways to assist a colleague in financial distress. Members who would normally compete against each other with similar trades or shops found common ground in the meetings.

Hay'at-e senifs also brought together members of all social classes, creating channels for communication and patronage through which well-off merchants could "exert some control and influence over younger, more restive, lower-class *bazaaris*" (Denoeux, pp. 142-43). Furthermore, the meetings conveyed a great deal of political

information, at great speed, into which the central government could not easily tap because of the meetings' informal nature. The meetings also enhanced the group's collective identity in religious terms, and the leadership of a given group's cleric strengthened the bazaar-mosque connection which was so important to the Iranian revolution. Funds collected at the *hay'at-e senifs* enabled the influence of the bazaar community to be felt in the greater community through charitable and civic contributions. This benevolence also created a basis for patron-client relationships between members of the bazaar and the urban poor, which enabled the bazaar to mobilize huge crowds to defend the bazaar's interests (Denoeux, pp. 142-44).

It is important to point out that the bazaar's opposition to the shah's regime was defensive in nature. Chapter III will discuss this in more detail from the regime's perspective, but at this point it is sufficient to refer again to Denoeux (p. 148), who records that "political and cultural factors, and not economic ones, played the determining role. It was an attempt by a substantially unified community to demonstrate and reassert its power and influence vis-à-vis a modernizing state whose policies were increasingly perceived as arbitrary, insulting, and harmful to both the material interests of the bazaar and the Islamic nature of Iranian society." It is the Islamic nature of Iranian society, and the religious networks controlled by the Shi'ite clerics, to which this chapter now turns.

2. Religious Network

The discussion which follows describes the mosque network in general, its connection with the intelligentsia, bazaar, and urban poor, and concludes with a description of the network which Khomeini so successfully employed. Denoeux identifies two types of religious networks: Double-edged, and Radical-Utopian. Double-edged networks can have either a stabilizing or destabilizing effect on the political system, radical-utopian networks "*always* have a destabilizing impact on the sociopolitical system, since they essentially represent conspiracies organized by small

groups of committed activists” (p. 172). While the general Iranian mosque network (like the bazaar network) was double-edged, the Khomeini network under the shah was radical-utopian.

a. The Mosque Network

The prominent position of religious networks as a form of political opposition owes much to the dominant role of Islam in Iranian society. Arjomand (p. 5) goes so far as to say that, “Islamic ideology, which has determined the direction of the Iranian revolution...could not have succeeded without the unusual institutional assets of its proponents, the Shi’ite men of religion. The story of the Islamic revolution in Iran must therefore begin with the establishment of Shi’ism as the state religion in 1501 [and includes] the consolidation of Shi’ite clerical power and the prevalence of a dual system of authority until the onset of centralization and the expansion of the power of the state.” The dual system of authority to which Arjomand refers consists of the Iranian state and what he terms the hierocracy⁹ as the two institutions of legitimate authority, including the inevitable rivalry between the two for the loyalty of the Iranian people. More importantly, the dual system of authority meant that the Shi’ite hierocracy was virtually autonomous. (Arjomand foreshadows a later chapter of this paper when he writes, “The most important feature distinguishing Shi’ite from Sunni Islam since the end of the eighteenth century is the separation of political and religious authority, and the corresponding autonomy of the religious institution from the state” (p. 75)). The significance of the hierocracy’s autonomy should not be underestimated: “...the degree of autonomy and disembedding of a leading social stratum—an elite—to the generation of revolutionary social change. Such autonomy facilitates development of coalitions with broader groups, and tends to result in far-reaching restructuring of social institutions. The disengagement of the Shi’ite hierocracy from the Pahlavi regime, the increased homogeneity of the *‘ulama* as an estate (status group), and the sharpened distinctness of their identity from secular intelligentsia go a long way toward explaining how they came to lead the first successful traditionalist revolution in modern history” (Eisenstadt, as

⁹ Arjomand employs this technical term to refer to “the Shi’ite religious institution. Neither “clergy” nor “church” [conveys] the requisite sense of a system of authority” (p.7).

quoted by Arjomand, p. 83). The term hierocracy may seem to imply hierarchy, but the organization of the Shi'ite institution prior to the revolution was in fact highly decentralized.

Arjomand comments on the hierocracy's organization: "there was no formal hierarchy of authority among the *mojtaheds*, and the congeries of clerics at the lower ranks could be differentiated only by the patronage of different *mojtaheds* and by a nonformalized scale of prestige and learning" (p. 14). There was no papal equivalent to confer status and position on the religious elite—these came only through the consensus of a community's elite (Denoeux, p. 164). The hierocracy was not only independent from the state and loosely organized, but around the most senior ayatollahs¹⁰ were formed extensive networks of personal contacts and reciprocal exchange among the various levels of the hierocracy, and thereby throughout urban Iranian society. These networks, as Denoeux notes, were "organizationally, financially, and ideologically independent of one another" (p. 163). This was crucial for Khomeini because, as a relatively marginal figure in the 1960s (because of his militancy), he was nevertheless able to build such a large following that even senior, moderate clerics submitted to his leadership and its radical implications as the revolution gained momentum.

The *marja'*¹¹ network was financially supported through the payment of religious dues (over which the government had little or no control), which the ayatollah redistributed as a form of patronage to seminary students, charitable causes, and the upkeep of his network. Such a network typically consisted of a core group of several hundred devoted former students who were themselves in charge of a large number of mosques and religious centers for debating and propagating the faith, each with its own substantial congregation (Denoeux, p. 162). These students typically enjoyed a collective identity fostered by shared experiences in their rigorous, ascetic religious training facilities. Friendships and loyalties established during these formative times cut across national, social, and ethnic boundaries. As in the bazaar network, these cross-cutting ties

¹⁰ Six senior ayatollahs, including Khomeini, are generally acknowledged to have existed in the mid-1970s.

¹¹ *Marja-i taqlid* translates "source of imitation," and refers to an ayatollah who developed a substantial following (Denoeux, p.163; Arjomand, p. 16)

were a critical ingredient in the power of the informal religious networks. Denoeux says, “the religious establishment’s amorphous organization under Muhammad Reza Shah was the informal foundation of its power in Iranian society at large....As a result [of the separation between the state and the religious establishment] the ulama’s influence had come to lie first and foremost in the strength of their relations with the population” (p. 166). The clerics’ integration with society enabled them to vocalize (and capitalize on) widely held grievances against the shah in the 1970s, especially those grievances which seemed to threaten the culture and Islamic integrity of most Iranians (Denoeux, pp. 166-68).

The most effective channels through which the population conveyed their grievances to the clerics, and through which the clerics in turn influenced the population, were informal meetings and associations. In the early 1970s, Arjomand (p. 92) observed, “religious groups mushroomed.” Arjomand (p. 91) references Gellner in explaining the phenomenon: “Movement from the rural periphery into urban centers has thus been historically associated with increasing religious orthodoxy and a more rigorous adherence to the legalistic and puritanical central tradition of Islam.” Halliday elaborates, attributing the rise in religious activity to “resistance to western and official values, partly in response to the abrupt social changes of recent years, and partly in support of the mosque as the one institution completely independent of the state” (1979, pp. 18-19). The venue for such meetings (mosques, shrines, houses of leading religious figures) being sacred places, provided safe havens for the expression of popular discontent. Denoeux remarks that “Networks built around Islamic places, institutions, and personnel offered the organizational resources, the political entrepreneurs, and the followings without which collective action is impossible” (p. 47).

Sufi orders¹² were historically the most important of a group of informally organized religious circles, sectarian groups, and religious brotherhoods through which

¹² Sufi Islam exists in both Sunni and Shia traditions and has three distinct meanings: 1) mystical, spiritual aspect of Islam; 2) popular practice of Islam separate from the Koran and Sunna; 3) Sufi brotherhoods, which are cultural/political organizations (Robinson, 2005a). The latter were characterized by organization which relied primarily on personal ties; devotion to a religious master; intense loyalty to worldwide members of the same brotherhood; a group experience which brought together all strata of society and provided a refuge from the chaos and alienation produced by rapid urbanization; and fulfillment of many charitable, educational, administrative, legal and economic functions (Denoeux, p.39-40).

religious solidarity were historically expressed. The earlier description of the bazaar network noted the importance of religion in binding together members of the bazaar as a whole, particularly within *hay'at-e senifs*. Similar groupings and connections existed among three critical segments of 1970s Iranian society: the urban poor, the intelligentsia, and the bazaar.

b. *The Mosque and the Urban Poor*

Within the overall mosque network a patron-client relationship existed, the backbone of which featured informal Shi'ite religious meetings, known as *hay'ats*¹³. The typical leader of such a group was a low-ranking cleric, who “provided psychological and social support and welfare services. In return, the clerics could expect a certain degree of respect and political loyalty on the part of Iran’s urban masses” (Kazemi, as quoted by Denoeux, p. 157). The *hay'ats* were composed of some thirty members and formed around regional, ethnic, or workplace contact. Although they were not attended by a majority of the urban poor, they were politically significant for three reasons. First, the meetings were the “only voluntary associations independent of the government found among the urban poor...prior to the revolution” (Denoeux, p. 157). Second, the interaction between the clerics and group members created durable lines of communication and a sense of solidarity between the hierarchy and the urban poor, as well as among the attendees themselves. Third is the aforementioned patronage function of the cleric, distributing food, clothing, and other necessities to the poor, thereby exerting an influence beyond the small membership of the *hay'at*. These meetings generally provided a stabilizing influence to the proliferating population of rural migrants, but their destabilizing quality was also unmistakable: “The vitality of traditional sentiment among the recent migrants into cities made them receptive to the propaganda of the traditionalist preachers and pamphleteers. These groups remained marginal and excluded from political processes until the early days of 1978, when with dramatic suddenness they were massively mobilized against the Pahlavi regime by Khomeini’s traditionalist party” (Arjomand, p. 96).

¹³ Not to be confused with *hay'at-e senifs*, which, although similar, took place in the bazaar, among bazaaris. *Hay'ats* were typically attended by the urban poor, and “were less structured and more recent than the *hay'at-e senifs* of the bazaar...[they] met in members’ homes, not in the mosque” (Denoeux, 1988, p. 157)

Under the influence of a Shi'ite establishment with its back to the wall in late 1978, the urban poor, mobilized through the *hay'ats* provided the revolution with the majority of both its foot soldiers and martyrs:

Of the angry, they were the angriest. They created neither the strategy nor the ideology of the revolution, and their opposition alone would never have cowed the regime. But they contributed the gigantic numbers before which the will of the government and the army collapsed. The mullahs, who had telephones, knew whom to contact to bring out the masses without telephones; many of those who marched came as members of their *hay'ats*. And many felt that they had internalized the fearless spirit of Hosain (Mottahedeh, as referenced by Denoeux, p. 159).

The power of informal networks in opposition to a regime was clearly demonstrated by the urban poor, and was equally evident among the Iranian intelligentsia, who started the revolution.

c. The Mosque and the Intelligentsia

The place of students and intellectuals in Iran was uneasy. Although students comprised the most consistent and vocal opposition to the shah's dictatorship, the regime afforded them very little space for political expression. The intellectual class perceived the official culture of the Pahlavis to be distasteful, disparaging the shah's national mythology as a militaristic, chauvinistic fabrication. They viewed the growing urban middle class and its western materialism with equal disdain (Halliday, p. 221). But the shah was compelled to expand higher education because his modernization efforts necessitated an educated workforce. The deepening of western influence that accompanied Iranian modernization, however, created a correspondingly deep sense of cultural alienation among Iranian intellectuals. "Whereas earlier generations of Iranian intellectuals had been concerned primarily with finding ways to modernize the country, many educated Iranians in the 1960s and 1970s became obsessed with maintaining the moral and cultural fabric of Iranian society. The search for progress had given way to a quest for authenticity and roots; the preoccupation with overcoming backwardness had been replaced with a fear of moral decay and the loss of cultural identity" (Denoeux, p. 160). Rediscovering Shi'ism was a way of connecting with Iranian culture, and led to a profusion of religious associations on campuses and in the homes of intellectuals.

Another venue was a sort of club known as Hosseiniyeh Ershad, in which took place “the diffusion of a reformulated and modernized understanding of Shi’ite Islam” (Denoeux, p. 161).

Nobody contributed more to this modernized understanding of Islam than Ali Shari’ati. His ideas and writings were immensely popular in these settings because they appeared to be both Islamic and modern. The appeal of a modern form of Islam was significant because the intelligentsia tended to view the clerics as backward traditionalists. Denoeux (p. 161) quotes Mortimer as attributing to Shari’ati the popular idea that “in fighting for Islam one was not demanding a return to obscurantism but working towards genuine national liberation and enlightenment.” The writings of revolutionary Islamic thinkers such as Qutb and Mawdudi were also consumed by Iran’s educated classes, but Khomeini used Shari’ati’s writings to persuade many intellectuals that a revolution under his (Khomeini’s) leadership would be progressive (Arjomand, p. 94). The Islamic revival in Iran as a whole became politicized in large part by the revival of Islam among Iran’s intellectuals. “Politicized intelligentsia in addition demanded political enfranchisement and inclusion in the political system” (Arjomand, pp. 96-97).

Although the associations among the intelligentsia did not include the cross-cutting ties that bound together members of all social and income strata as in the bazaar and urban poor networks, the intelligentsia network became tremendously influential once it came together with the Shi’ite hierocracy. This merge began in the 1960s and was enabled by the interchange between intellectuals and progressive clerics who used their exposure to western ideas to make Shi’ism relevant to modern Iranians and their modern problems. Some religious nationalist liberals (especially Mehdi Bazargan) worked towards the same goals from the intelligentsia side, and the meeting of the intelligentsia and progressive clerics came first in the form of informal “Islamic associations” known as *Anjomanha’ye Islami*. Members of the intelligentsia “also established contacts with Khomeini in Najaf, while Khomeini and pro-Khomeini forces in Iran endeavored to build ties to Iranian students abroad, especially the Moslem Student Association in the United States” (Milani, as quoted by Denoeux, pp. 161-62). The religious establishment’s informal connections to the educated classes thus provided the

political impetus for the revolution, connections with the urban poor provided the foot soldiers, and connections to the bazaar, to which we now turn, provided the financial grease for the revolutionary skids.

3. The Mosque – Bazaar Alliance

The associations which united the religious establishment and the bazaar at the time of the revolution were detailed earlier. Clerics and bazaaris, though, had been natural allies for much of Iran's history. Merchants in Iran were not, as elsewhere, taken over and reorganized by foreigners or seriously infringed upon by religious minorities (such as Jews and Bahais). "Thus, even though the Iranian merchant community remained quite fragmented along ethnic and regional lines, it still formed a relatively homogeneous group...[which was] one of the factors that spurred Iran's merchant community to defend its collective interests in face of European economic encroachment, which was seen as a threat to both Islam and Iranian sovereignty" (Denoeux, p. 64). The ulama's situation was simultaneously and equally improved, so that when the west began to encroach on Iran's material and cultural interests, the ulama and bazaaris, along with the networks they controlled, fell into a natural alliance against the authorities. "Nobody was better qualified than the ulama to speak against the intrusion of [non-believing foreigners] in the abode of Islam....As for the bazaaris, they could provide both the economic clout and the large numbers of demonstrators that protest movements needed to be effective" (Denoeux, p. 66).

The mosque-bazaar alliance was reinforced by a shared sense of cultural alienation from the ruling elite as far back as the 1920s as western ideas began to threaten the cultural identities of both the clerics and the bazaaris. After World War II the bazaar-mosque connections continued with the same shared outlook since the bazaar and the mosque each had to suffer from numerous state attempts to limit their respective spheres of influence (Denoeux, p. 136). Ties were further enhanced through intermarriage, and, significantly, by bazaaris receiving "their education in religious schools. This helps explain why throughout their lives they would show great respect for religious learning, while their regular involvement in religious meetings and celebrations heightened their

self-perceptions in religious terms” (De Groot, as referenced by Denoeux, p. 136). The bazaar was also the financial backbone of the mosque, providing 80 percent of the ulama’s financial resources in the 1970s through various collections and endowments (Denoeux, p. 137).

The integration of the Shi’ite hierocracy into all strata of Iranian society through autonomous informal networks made it possible for an underestimated, but brilliant political operator like Khomeini to translate widely held grievances and perceived threats into an Islamic revolution, the likes of which the modern world had never seen and did not anticipate. Does the following description of Khomeini’s network reveal strengths and strategies that a similarly charismatic figure could duplicate in Saudi Arabia? What was different about Khomeini compared to other ayatollahs that he was able to accomplish this feat from exile?

4. Khomeini’s Network

The major difference between Khomeini’s network compared to other religious networks is that the latter were destabilizing only under certain conditions while the former was what Denoeux describes as a radical-utopian network. Radical-utopian networks derive their appeal from “their ability to provide individuals poorly integrated into modern society with alternative channels for membership into a tightly knit community. To their members, these networks also constitute instruments toward the realization of a millenarian dream, and for the making of a pure religiopolitical order, in which injustice and foreign domination will have no place” (Denoeux, p. 172).¹⁴ In order to create such an appeal Khomeini borrowed heavily from Shari’ati to craft a radical-utopian ideology which tapped into the grievances of all those affected by the shah’s well-intentioned but insensitive, intrusive policies. Khomeini’s network transmitted the ideology throughout Iranian society, and over time it gained traction at each level:

In making himself the unofficial representative of the disinherited...the ayatollah of Najaf succeeded in doing something that no one in Sunni

¹⁴ See also the introduction to Iran’s religious networks on p. 30 of this chapter

Islam ever had accomplished before. He attracted the support of the traditional rural and urban base that had always followed the lead of a cleric of acknowledged stature, as well as the backing of the more modern social elements of the cities—students, the salaried middle class, and other progressive-minded workers. These people were receptive to a line of thinking that empowered them as harbingers of the future (Kepel, p. 41).

Hay'ats became critical elements of Khomeini's network when his followers in Tehran's mosques distributed cassette recordings of Khomeini's sermons denouncing the shah and were and played enthusiastically at *hay'at* meetings (Arjomand, pp. 92-93; Denoeux, p. 159). Khomeini maintained the financial autonomy necessary to fund the widening movement and support his followers because members of his network continued to collect religious dues. Khomeini also maintained an important link to the new Iranian middle class by cultivating his existing contacts among religiously committed intellectuals who opposed the shah. Thus, Khomeini's network was primed by the mid-1970s to fulfill three key functions as the revolution gathered momentum: (1) Encouraging and widening the movement; (2) Giving shape to the highly decentralized movement by providing a charismatic leader around whom the opposition coalesced; and (3) Forcing the hand of the most senior clerics, who resisted becoming involved against the regime. Once they had been persuaded that compromise and moderation were self-defeating strategies, the resources at their disposal became available to Khomeini's network (Denoeux, pp. 183-85).

The preceding pages describe the opposition to the Iranian regime in terms of its informal network structure. The key points so far observed are that Iran's dictatorial regime forced opposition into informal avenues, but only because the opposition was able to function autonomously and connect with many levels of urban society could it capitalize on the revolutionary potential of an aggrieved population. We turn now to the structure of Saudi Arabia's opposition.

B. THE SAUDI OPPOSITION

The internal workings of the Saudi regime and opposition groups are just as difficult to discern and easy to misread now as were the social and political dynamics of the Iranian Revolution at the time. Anthony Cordesman (2002, p. 37), a highly respected

scholar in military and Middle Eastern affairs, notes that the Saudi government has a policy of avoiding any public disclosure of its internal problems: “The Saudis have always treated internal unrest as a virtual state secret.”¹⁵ Research by foreigners into Saudi society must have the formal approval and supervision of the Saudi government, leading another authoritative commentator on Arabian Gulf affairs to lament unofficially about the dearth of detailed information available on Saudi informal networks, “We just don't have that kind of anthropological, on-the-ground political stuff on Saudi. Wish we did.” Much can nevertheless be observed about the structure of organizations and forces known to be opposed to the Saudi status quo.

Saudi Arabia's most vociferous opposition group, al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP), operates on the fringes of Saudi society. And while Usama bin Laden (UBL) is charismatic, he has been unsuccessful in rallying most Muslims in general, and most Saudi Muslims in particular, to his brand of jihad. Opponents of Saudi Arabia's status quo with the deepest roots in society profess loyalty to the Al Saud and do not, therefore, constitute a threat to the royal family's longevity. In other words, in order for the opposition to present a considerable threat the stars must be aligned: various opposition must forces grow less fractious, united (perhaps) by a prolonged slump in oil prices that strips the regime of its patronage power, and a well-integrated and charismatic opposition figure must arise around whom the Saudi opposition coalesces.

A few preliminary comments should be made about the nature of Saudi political opposition. To begin with, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is ruled by a paternalistic, if not authoritarian, regime which strictly limits vehicles of political expression. The royal family collects all state revenue and distributes it in a vast system of patronage which envelopes every significant economic, educational, social, religious, and political institution. There exists, consequently, a general unwillingness among the myriad recipients of state largesse to bite (through political opposition) the hand that feeds them. More will follow in Chapter III about the structure of the Saudi regime and its integration with society, but for now, recalling Denoeux's earlier comments on the subject, suffice it

¹⁵ Cordesman's comments were made in the context of the joint Saudi-US investigation of the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996 in which 19 US servicemembers were killed.

to say that the regime's control over domestic politics suggests the importance of informal political expression. Secondly, Saudi Arabia's urban areas have also been expanding rapidly for some years now. "The capital Riyadh is well on its way to becoming the first mega city of the region with its current population exceeding 4.26 million¹⁶....The population of Riyadh is projected to exceed 11.1 million by 2020" (Arab News, 2005). This urban population growth cannot be attributed solely to natural reproduction. A recent study¹⁷ "revealed that the growth of Riyadh's population is triggered not only by natural reasons but also by a continuing wave of migration of Saudis from other parts of the Kingdom. The study observed that Riyadh's population has increased by 120 percent during the last few years. Government and private sector efforts are under way to develop Riyadh's infrastructure to cope with the growing demand" (Arab News, 2005). Rapid urbanization is a factor which has already been shown to be a tremendous factor in the proliferation of informal networks.

Finally, the Saudi opposition, such as it is, rises from a population that is more conservative than the Saudi regime. The implication is that any governmental reform agenda must, in order to gain any popular traction, be shown to be in accordance with Islamic principles. This dynamic sets up a real constraint on the regime, which is under pressure from external sources, including the United States, to impose educational, commercial, and social reforms on Saudi society, but which reforms often run counter to Islamic principles and/or traditions. For example, Saudi Arabia's World Trade Organization (WTO) accession was held up by the U.S. Congress for some time because Saudi Arabia upholds the Arab League boycott of trade with Israel¹⁸ (Arabic News, 2005). Officially abandoning the boycott, as demanded by Congress, would demonstrate to the Saudi population that the regime considers commercial interests to take precedence over a long-held principle. While the Saudi religious establishment might be enjoined to issue a supportive statement, ordinary Saudis would likely perceive yet another example

¹⁶ Including adjoining suburban areas of Al-Dirayya, Al-Haer and Arqa districts

¹⁷ Study conducted by Arriyadh Development Authority

¹⁸ Congressional critics of Saudi Arabia also referenced the kingdom's human rights record, religious intolerance, and alleged terrorism financing.

of royal corruption or hypocrisy. Similar illustrations could be drawn from the arena of Saudi education reform and also the role of women in Saudi society.

The preceding example suggests the prominence of religion in any discussion of Saudi opposition, which in turn necessitates a discussion of the terms “Islamism” and “Islamist.” Islamists are those who use the history, symbols, and language of Islam for political purposes. Islamism is political Islam and not Muslim religious practice. Just as the American political spectrum includes various parties, and numerous factions within those parties, Islamism encompasses a broad array of agendas. Islamism therefore encompasses Salafis: radical ideologues who construct ideologies which justify violence in order to accomplish political ends. The Salafi spectrum includes Jihadis—individuals and organizations who carry out violent acts in the name of Islam. A further subset consists of Transnational Jihadis, the only example of which is al Qaeda. The term “Islamic fundamentalist” is another term used loosely (and often uselessly) to describe politically active Muslims on a broad scale from Islamists to Transnational Jihadis. A graphical depiction is shown in Figure 1 below.¹⁹

¹⁹ The nearer the center of the concentric circles of “Islamism” one goes, the more Sunni/Shi’i animosity declines. This tendency supports the notion that Jihadis are intensely political, willing to put aside sectarian differences in the interest of their chief aim.

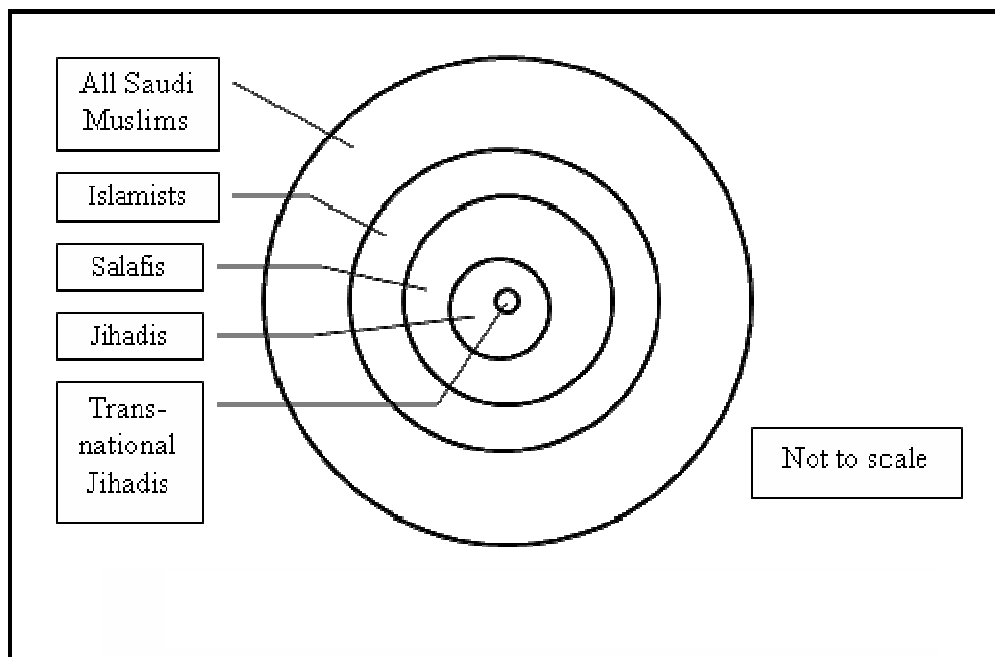


Figure 1 Islam and Islamists in Saudi Arabia²⁰

Saudi opposition organizations, because they arise from a conservative Islamic population, are therefore Islamist. Certainly not all are Jihadis or even Salafis, but all are Islamist. The categorization is helpful in differentiating the various strains of opposition (and support) within the Saudi religious milieu. The discussion below begins by discriminating between, and describing, opposition organizations and opposition forces, followed by some observations about the likely character and impact of informal urban networks in Saudi Arabia.

As mentioned previously, the Saudi regime permits no formal domestic organizations in explicit opposition to the government: neither political party, nor labor union; neither professional organization nor student group. We have seen already that a similar scenario in Iran funneled the opposition to the mosque and to informal networks. In Saudi Arabia, however, the official religious establishment is an instrument of the state and therefore offers little outlet for either popular political expression or clerical autonomy. The establishment, funded by the state, controls personnel management in

²⁰ Glenn E. Robinson, unpublished

Saudi mosques and also the content of the sermons preached by those appointees. The Wahhabi clerics and institutions are neither fiscally nor administratively autonomous from the Saudi government, as was the Iranian clergy. I include the religious establishment as part of the greater discussion about the Saudi opposition, though, because it is the establishment that has historically carried the greatest weight of Saudi legitimacy, thereby placing the greatest constraints on the Saudi regime's room for political maneuver. Nevertheless, "[t]he religious sector is so vast that it is not hard to find a niche in it from which to say and write critical things about the Al Saud" (Gause, 2002). Gause continues:

The religious institutions [are] the largest and most powerful organized force in Saudi society. Their funding comes directly from the government. Everyone in the religious sector, from the Grand Mufti through the members of the Higher Council of *'Ulama* and the officials in the religious ministries to the teachers in the religious colleges and the prayer leaders of the local mosques, are all employees of the Saudi state. Those who hold the top positions are all appointed directly by the king.

The partnership began with a political-military-religious alliance between the founder of the Saudi state and the founder of the Wahhabi version of Islam, and continues today in a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby the Al Saud act as a patron to the religious establishment in return for reliable religious justification of the Saudi political status quo. The Wahhabi establishment has lost some of its original credibility (and thereby its ability to confer legitimacy on the regime) because, "[a]fter decades of relative autonomy, the religious establishment was relegated to secondary status; today, more often than not, it rubber stamps official decisions, issuing religious rulings to validate the regime's political stands" (ICG, 2004b). The ageing clerics of the official establishment are losing their appeal to the burgeoning Saudi youth—few young men aspire to join the official ulama²¹. Members of the establishment have little incentive to speak out against the regime that pays them, nor does the establishment take a position on foreign policy issues like the Saudi-U.S. relationship. As noted, however, the establishment is a major social force. And, while there is little reliable documentation to reference, it is entirely

²¹ The phenomenon is similar to the changing prestige of the Roman Catholic priesthood in America—fewer and fewer are hearing or heeding the call to serve in a clerical capacity (Harding, 2005)

realistic to expect that within such a large and amorphous organization informal factions exist which, should the regime go too far too fast down the reformist road, could be emboldened to not only write critical things about the Al Saud but also to throw their weight behind an emergent and charismatic opponent of the regime. For this reason, attention should be paid if dissenting clerics become willing to suffer the consequences of speaking out against the regime (LaPointe, 2005).

One might reasonably question whether clerics on the government payroll constitute a greater threat to the regime than al-Qaeda. Indeed, despite having no official voice within the Saudi religious establishment, al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) has become the best-known Saudi opposition organization²². QAP represents the far right of the Islamist scale as a sort of local branch of a Transnational Jihadi group. Its goals, however, are local, not transnational. QAP is committed to the expulsion of infidels (including, and especially, Americans) from the Arabian Peninsula and violent overthrow of the regime, against which it has proclaimed *takfir*, or apostasy (ICG, 2004b; Gause, 2004a).

QAP fits Denoeux's description of a radical utopian network. These "*always* have a destabilizing impact on the sociopolitical system, since they essentially represent conspiracies organized by small groups of committed activists" (p. 172). Gilles Kepel (p. 16) comments on al Qaeda's general appeal, notes the impact of clandestinity on a group's connection with society:

Al Qaeda is cut off from the world by its strictly clandestine nature....bin Laden's organization relies on uncertain channels within the mass media, which...at best are capable of provoking only an immediate emotional reaction of solidarity, a fleeting enthusiasm. This reaction is instant but short-lived, because its promoters have none of the social relay points of a well-entrenched movement that might be capable of translating such emotion into civil disobedience—unlike the...Iranian clergy in 1978.

While the Saudi government was slow to acknowledge a local root of international terrorism even after the well-documented participation and logistical support of Saudi citizens in the events of September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on Saudi

²² QAP would reject the descriptor "Saudi" since the term implies recognition the Al Saud as legitimate rulers of Arabia. I use the term simply because QAP is composed of citizens of Saudi Arabia.

soil in May and November, 2003 galvanized the Saudi leadership into determined counterterrorism (CT) efforts. Subsequent Saudi CT efforts have been quite successful, helped by the fact that QAP violence perpetrated against Saudis, not just Americans or foreigners, appears to have marginalized the group from both mainstream Saudi society and also senior Wahhabi clerics (Cordesman, 2002; ICG, 2004a))²³. While some Saudis may agree with QAP's condemnation of the Saudi regime's Islamic credentials (Gause, 2004a), all indications are that the Saudi public reject UBL's and QAP's methods. This is evidence which supports Kepel's suggestion that QAP is destined for failure as long as it fails to establish "social relay points" within Saudi society. The main point about QAP is that, although it garners more headlines than any opposition group or force, it is inherently weak and does not pose a significant threat to Saudi regime stability because it is disconnected from the larger Saudi society (ICG, 2004b, p. i). QAP's revolutionary Iranian equivalent is the Fedayin Guerrillas or the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, not the powerful informal networks of the Iranian bazaar and mosque.

Whereas QAP is the only opposition *organization* of significance²⁴, there are several important opposition *forces* at play in Saudi Arabia today. One force is harsh demographics— growing population and rapid urbanization concurrent with increasing unemployment constitutes a recipe for widespread discontent. "Urbanization also provides sheer concentrated numbers, an essential element of mass-based politics. As with education, urbanization does not produce uniform political results. But in the last 20 years the correlation between urbanization and the growth of Islamist opposition throughout the Middle East has been very strong" (Gause, 2002). While high oil prices currently permit the Saudi government to mitigate the problems presented by massive unemployment in the short term, stability in the long-term demands economic diversification and/or social change which removes the stigma of conducting manual and menial labor currently performed by millions of foreign workers²⁵. The Saudi

²³ Even the most vocal critics of the regime among Saudi clerics were quick to distance themselves from Al Qaeda and UBL after 9/11.

²⁴ Other dissident organizations exist, such as the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), which is based outside Saudi Arabia in London, but have had no demonstrable success in creating momentum for social or political change within the kingdom.

government has demonstrated both its willingness and ability to deport foreigners en masse—witness the wholesale deportation of Yemenis during the first Gulf War (Nonneman, 2002). Both forms of change, however, disrupt the status quo of Saudi domestic power. Economic diversification would reduce the royal monopoly on state revenues. Moreover, establishing a tax base to extract revenue from a diversified economy and a “Saudised”²⁶ workforce (in which many Saudis may accept employment in fields previously considered to be demeaning) will undoubtedly require the government to be more accountable to the masses—effectively distributing power down-echelon. It is true that demographic problems do not necessarily constitute direct opposition to the Saudi regime, but a massive number of discontented young men *do* constitute a force in favor of a change in the status quo.

Another force opposed to the status quo is the Islamist movement. The regime has faced challenges from Islamists before, most notably the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by a group of religious zealots. The Islamists, however, are far from being a monolithic block of anti-regime opposition groups. As described earlier, there are many shades of political Islam, including social reformers, political reformers, religious conservatives, and a few secular liberal reformers. The Islamist opponents are thus a fragmented force, but a force nonetheless. The assorted component groups are described differently by various scholars. A fairly current and descriptive taxonomy is used by the International Crisis Group in their 2004 background report on Saudi Islamists, and will be used below. The categories, summarized in Figure 2, include Jihadists, Reformists, Rejectionists, and Shi’ite Islamists.

²⁵ Some indicators suggest that suggest that such a change is already occurring in Saudi society. A recent Arab News report states: “The tragedy about this job-hunting drama is that university graduates are fighting with others to join the military services with the rank of private....The fight for this kind of jobs reflects the plight of the armies of unemployed Saudi youth who have become a liability to their families, causing mounting tension and anxiety in the family. College graduates now view applying for the job of a soldier not as catastrophic; for them something is better than nothing” (Hashim, 2005).

²⁶ “Saudisation” is a term used to describe the effort to place qualified Saudi nationals in jobs historically held by foreigners. The term is gaining acceptance—witness a recruiting site at www.Saudisation.com.

1. Jihadists²⁷

Jihadists stand against the Saudi regime and against U.S. influence in both the Kingdom and the larger Muslim world. As noted, the violent methods of radical salafist groups such as al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) lack broad-based popular support in Saudi Arabia for revolutionary action to overthrow the Al Saud. Isolated support occasionally surfaces, however. From within Saudi Arabia, for example, before the May, 2003 bombings, three clerics published their condemnation of liberal reformers, implied approval for violence against non-Muslims, and endorsed a group of nineteen radicals identified by the regime. These pronouncements were followed later in the year by recantations by the same three clerics and a call for Saudis to obey the official Saudi ulama (body of Muslim clerics). Whether sincere or coerced, the recantations demonstrate a continued ability of the regime to procure what it desires from the official religious establishment.

The regime has less control over Saudi jihadists who operate abroad. The best-known of these is Sa'ad al-Faqih, a London-based veteran of the Afghani Mujahideen campaign against the Soviets. He is an outspoken and virulent critic of the Saudi regime, but his ability to instigate protest within the Kingdom is demonstrably limited²⁸. The largest rally he has so far been able to produce consisted of less than three hundred participants, and a follow on effort was completely unsuccessful (Gause, 2004b). While his English-language pronouncements are cloaked in the language of human-rights and democracy, his message to Saudis in Arabic have supported "a strict interpretation of the Shari'a and Islamic custom, opposed most rights for women, made strong anti-Shi'ite statements, opposed the Arab-Israeli peace process and denied Israel's right to exist" (Cordesman, 2002).

Jihadist opposition is by all measures limited. QAP retains the ability to create sporadic demonstrations of defiance, but these are episodic and are a nuisance, rather

²⁷ Categorized by Gause (2004) as "Islamist Opposition", and by Cordesman (2002) as, simply, "religious...groups that use violence to achieve their ends"

²⁸ Al-Faqih runs an organization called Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), which advances Islamist opposition to the Saudi regime via the internet and satellite television (Gause, 2004).

than a threat, to the regime. Little public support has been shown for vocal opponents of the regime, and the regime anyway retains a proven capability to persuade its critics to change their tune or stop singing.

2. Reformists

This collection of actors is subdivided into political reformists and social reformists. The best known of the political reformists²⁹ are independent of the religious establishment, and have their roots in the *sahwa*³⁰ movement (ICG, 2004b). They first came to the regime's attention during the Gulf War of 1990-91, during which many of them were jailed for their criticism of the government's close and dependent relationship with the United States. Even at the height of their popularity, however, Islamist political reformists have not called into question the Al Saud's legitimacy as rulers of Saudi Arabia. Cordesman (2002) says of Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, a prominent (former *sahwa*) political reformist, "[t]heir main grievances have not been based on direct criticism of the Saudi government and the royal family, but rather on external issues such as Western domination and neocolonialism. Hawali did not question the political or religious authority of the Saudi state, but criticized its subordination to...the United States." After 9/11, however, these same critics came out forcefully against both UBL and foreign critics of the Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. Because of their early anti-regime stance (which was in stark contrast to the rubber-stamp loyalty of the religious establishment) leaders among this group have earned a fair amount of credibility among ordinary Saudis. The Al Saud's recent success in co-opting prominent members of the *sahwa* group is therefore a significant boon to the regime's legitimacy. The other side of the *sahwa* coin, however, is that when political reformists like the *sahwa* group speak of reform to Saudi society, they mean reforming those parts of society that have been influenced by the west and/or secular ideas and have drifted away from (the *sahwa* interpretation of) pure Islamic law and custom. Islamist political reformers are thus staunchly opposed to

²⁹ Referred to by Gause (2004) as "Salafi Islamic activists," while Cordesman (2002) identifies "Hard-line peaceful oppositionists," non-violent Islamist oppositionists."

³⁰ *Sahwa* translates to "awakening".

domestic reform of the educational, administrative, and judicial systems, and also oppose the Saudi-U.S. relationship (Gause, 2004a).

Political reformists are not a unified block, however. As the ICG reports in its 2004 report, *Who are the Islamists?*, there were, since before the Gulf War of 1990-91, “a variety of undercurrents, some closer to Wahhabism, others to the Muslim Brotherhood. Among the latter are sub-divisions between so-called Bannaists and Qutbists³¹. Today, such divisions are manifested in conflicting positions on issues such as relations with liberal reformers, Shi’ites or Sufis, and attitudes toward al-Qaeda and other violent Islamists.”

Social Reformists are an emerging, informal group that seems comfortable with democratic ideals of popular participation and political action based on compromise and tolerance. This group is still stoutly religious, but willing to associate and participate with secular reformers, women, and even Shi’ites. Islamist reformers are the only group interested in a fundamental change in the political status quo, but go out of their way to emphasize their loyalty to the Saudi state and regime while simultaneously calling for a constitutional monarchy and greater political freedom. It is a tough sell, especially since the social reformist’s goals are more aligned than any other Saudi opposition element with American desires for reform. In order to achieve these reforms, however, the Saudi regime would undermine its support from both the religious establishment and the salafi activists.

The paradoxical choice with which the Saudi regime must grapple (and which U.S. foreign policy decision makers must acknowledge) is that effecting reforms will cause short-term instability by alienating the regime’s Islamic legitimacy. “Islamist activists, while rallying to support the regime, also warned against political changes that would call into question the privileged place that the religious establishment and the “Wahhabi” interpretation of Islam have in the country” (Gause, 2004b). This paradox is not widely appreciated in the United States, as illustrated by a recent statement from the

³¹ Bannaism and Qutbism are –isms attached to the ideas of the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, and its other renowned ideologue, Sayyid Qutb.

Center for Security Policy in Washington, D.C.: “The Saudis can no longer be with us *and* against us. They must be made to choose” (CSP, 2005).

Saudi Islamists	Positions towards:			
	Regime	Political Reform	Social Reform	Saudi - U.S.
(Salafi) Jihadists QAP (marginalized by society)	Considers it apostate, violently opposed	Utopian: desire Islamic state free from 'infidel'	Violently oppose change to status quo	U.S. = "far enemy," KSA = "near enemy"
Salafi Islamic Activists / <i>Sahwa</i> Emerging alliance with Islamist Political Reformers	Formerly opposed, now profess loyalty, oppose QAP violence (esp. since 2003 attacks)	Silent	Strongly oppose changes to education, role of women	Oppose
Islamist Reformers (Political) (limited popular appeal bolstered by emerging affiliation with <i>Sahwa</i>)	Profess loyalty oppose QAP violence	Call for constitutional monarchy, popular participation, civil society	Favor reform, but with strong conservative bent (esp. regarding role of women)	Criticize close association with U.S.
Islamist Reformers (Social) (limited impact within KSA, some intellectual and royal allies)	Profess loyalty, vehemently oppose violence QAP/jihadists	Oppose rapid political reform status quo because without concurrent social reform	Criticise Wahhabi conservatism: ad-society: open vocate modern interpretation of Islam	Not pro-U.S., but espouse ideas favorable to U.S. democracy advocates
Rejectionists	Reject concept of nation-statehood	Apolitical, withdrew from society. Later split among jihadis, reformers	Apolitical, withdrew from society. Later split among jihadis, reformers	Apolitical, or fall in line with new associates
Shiites	Profess loyalty, courted by some reformers and King Abdullah	Participants in National Dialogues, favor democracy	Favor religious freedom	Silent
Religious Establishment Wahhabi institutions (waning credibility)	Rubber-stamp approval, condemn QAP violence	Politically neutral	Oppose change to status quo	Politically neutral

Figure 2 Saudi Islamists

3. Rejectionists

Rejectionist Islamists do not constitute a unified group, either socially or politically, but share some general characteristics: rejection of a Saudi nation-state; rejection of the *sahwa* point of view as overly political; and rejection of the Jihadists as un-Islamic deviants. Whereas *sahwa* reformists engaged in political discourse and broad social and cultural issues, rejectionists “focused on questions of individual faith, morals and ritual practices” (ICG, 2004b). Rejectionists tend, according to the same International Crisis Group report, to be “hostile to the very concept of the nation-state, seeking not to modify it but to break with it—most often through withdrawal but at times through revolt.” It was from a rejectionist strain that Juhayman al-Utaybi’s followers seized Mecca’s Grand Mosque in 1979. Other rejectionists withdrew from society, living either in self-imposed exile in neighboring countries or among desert-dwelling Bedouin. A third group of rejectionists dismissed both Wahhabism and the *sahwa* teachings centered in the education establishment, contenting themselves with learning through informal religious study circles (ICG, 2004b). The most visible rejectionist organization in Saudi Arabia, until its repression in the aftermath of the Grand Mosque takeover, has been *al-Jamaa al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba* (JSM). JSM ideas concerning social corruption and moral decadence persisted among rejectionists even after the organization dissolved. These ideas were challenged after the Gulf War of 1991, which effectively politicized rejectionists by compelling them to either support or condemn the regime’s sharp repression of increasingly critical *sahwa* activists. Those rejectionists who were persuaded that the regime (including both the establishment clerics who unconditionally supported the regime as well as *sahwa* activists who recanted or moderated their stance) had become impious joined the jihadists. Other rejectionists retreated again from both politics and society, while others have joined one of the various reformist circles (ICG, 2004b).

4. Shi’ite Islamists

Saudi Shi’ites compose approximately ten percent of the Saudi population, residing mainly in the oil-rich Eastern Province. The official Wahhabi stance towards

Shi'ism is that it is a heretical interpretation of Islam. Shi'ites have for decades, therefore, been treated as second-class Saudi citizens. Following the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Saudi Shi'ite activists were emboldened to confront the regime, but were subsequently crushed by the Saudi National Guard. Two decades later Saudi Shi'ites are still a persecuted minority and maintain a low profile, although Crown Prince Abdullah has deliberately included Shi'ite leaders in his ongoing National Dialogues³². Saudi Shi'ite extremist groups "like the Saudi Hezbollah probably have less than 1,000 members of any kind and less than 250 hard core members. Most Saudi Shi'ites still are not militant and even most Shi'ites in exile advocate peaceful change...The Shi'ite population of Saudi Arabia is also too small to succeed in any kind of uprising or separatism" (Cordesman, 2002).

C. SAUDI POLITICAL APATHY?

Despite these various opposition forces there is a notable absence of visible, vigorous political activity among ordinary Saudis. This can be attributed to one, or a combination of, three plausible possibilities: (1) The regime has successfully muted credible opposition; (2) Saudis are politically apathetic; or (3) The regime has forced the opposition into informal venues.

Hypotheses one, a successful counter-opposition effort by the regime, is eminently plausible based on observing the regime's effective domination of the religious establishment, but even more so in its repeated ability to persuade many of its critics to come to its side during crises such as the Gulf War and 9/11. Repression has had an indirect effect as well. Routine imprisonment of outspoken critics among journalists, reformers, and clerics has served to chill the fervor of most potential activists. As of this writing the three signatories of the December, 2003 petition calling for a Constitutional Monarchy, who have refused to retract their appeal, remain imprisoned. This chilling

³² The National Dialogues were initiated by (then) Crown Prince Abdullah and brought together in 2003 and 2004 "Saudis from diverse religious backgrounds and political orientations...to discuss with unusual frankness sensitive issues linked to religious differences, education and causes of Islamic extremism" (ICG, 2004a). "The meeting called for respect for differences of opinion within Islam and for strengthening national unity, while cautioning that the central role of the religious establishment in national life should not be questioned" (Gause, 2004b).

effect may explain the quiescence of Islamist reformers during Saudi Arabia's recent municipal elections.³³

Except in the Eastern province where the Shia are concentrated, participation in the elections was quite low. This suggests that there is not a pent-up demand for political participation (Gause, 2005). But the second possible explanation for the lack of visible, vigorous political activity—that Saudis are politically apathetic—must be approached with care because the measurements used to gauge political activity in western democracies, which are characterized by a dynamic interaction between taxpaying citizens and an accountable government, cannot be directly applied to the highly functional Saudi political culture of leadership by consensus but which has no history or institutions of democratic participation.³⁴ The fact that Saudis do not participate in politics in a way that is easily measurable by western instruments could mean that Saudis are content to participate in politics through their tradition of leadership-by-consensus, not necessarily that they are politically apathetic. Another ramification of Saudis' lack of experience in democracy was that even a minimal amount of organization in the many, many candidates' election campaigns was sufficient to produce victory. It was, moreover, conservative Islamists who most successfully organized the street, violating the rules in the process by advocating a ticket of candidates. The regime took no corrective or punitive action against the Islamists, however, suggesting that the royal family did not want to risk a confrontation. Political and social reformists, in the shadow of their still-imprisoned colleagues, did not demonstrate a significant amount of political organization (Gause, 2005). It is also worth noting the election took place at a time when oil prices approaching \$60 per barrel enabled the government to manage popular discontent by opening the patronage relief valve. Previously, the loudest voices for real change in Saudi Arabia arose at a point in time when low oil prices were squeezing the regime's source of patronage.

³³ These elections were one of the first, tentative steps towards a more representative form of Saudi government. The elections featured a plethora of candidates to fill half of the seats on municipal councils, which function in an advisory capacity only.

³⁴ Political apathy, a lack of popular interest in politics or a quietist attitude towards government, should not be confused with "voter apathy", with which any American politician is familiar.

The most interesting possible explanation for visible, vigorous political activity, whether or not the first two could be proven, is that currents of Saudi opposition flow through informal channels, outside the pervasive influence of state institutions. The existence of informal networks (in a society in which avenues for formal opposition are in the firm control of the regime) is a safe assumption. The nature of those networks, as mentioned, is not apparent even to close observers of Saudi Arabia. Some likely sources of networks which could, in Denoeux's terminology, be double-edged, are informal study groups, student groups, and the *diwaniyeh*. The rejectionist tradition of holding religious study groups in member's homes offers a precedent similar to the Iranian *hay'at*. The growth of secondary and university education opportunities also favors the emergence of networks of student groups. The Saudi tradition of *diwaniyeh* is a third possible facilitation of informal networks. The Saudi king has traditionally held a *majlis*, or court, in the primary executive office called the Royal Diwan.

The purpose of the majlis was to provide Saudi citizens an opportunity to make personal appeals to the king for redress of grievances or assistance in private matters. Plaintiffs typically sought the king's intervention with the state's bureaucracy. During the reigns of King Khalid and King Fahd, it was customary for each person attending the majlis to explain his complaints and simultaneously present a written petition, which the monarch would later study and answer in a subsequent session. Provincial governors follow the king's example and hold a public majlis, "often on a daily basis, at which [they hear] petitions from local residents" (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

These traditional meetings could conceivably facilitate collective opposition activity, but the risk is minimal because provincial governors are all either members of, or owe their position to, the royal family.

D. SUMMARY

The differences between the groups opposed to the Iranian regime and the Saudi regime are evident. Iran's opposition was rooted deep in society. Iranian opposition forces found a voice and a weapon in the informal networks of the mosque and the bazaar, which were, in turn, animated by a charismatic leader in Khomeini. Saudi Arabia's loudest opposition group, on the other hand, has limited roots in Saudi society.

And while UBL is charismatic, he has been unsuccessful in rallying most Muslims in general, and most Saudi Muslims in particular, to his brand of jihad. Opponents of Saudi Arabia's status quo with the deepest roots in society have also stated and demonstrated loyalty to the Al Saud regime, so they cannot be considered a credible threat to the royal family's longevity. If Saudi opposition forces grow less fractious, are united by a prolonged slump in oil prices that strips the regime of its patronage power, or if a well-integrated and charismatic opposition figure arises around whom the Saudi opposition coalesces, then the al-Saud will face a true threat. Their ability to weather such a storm, compared to the Shah of Iran's, is the subject of Chapter III.

III. THE REGIME

A. INTRODUCTION

Jack Miklos, an American foreign service officer who served in Iran asks, “Once having chosen the authoritarian path, is it possible to ease back after a time and turn from master and leader to servant answerable to independent opinion and contrary views (1983, pp. 16-17)?” He answers his own question by quoting Samuel Huntington, who, says Miklos, could recall no incidence of a direct and peaceful shift from absolute monarchy to an electoral regime, “with a government responsible to parliament and a king who reigned but did not rule. Such a change, he points out, would involve a basic shift in legitimacy of the monarch to the sovereignty of the people and such change generally requires either time or revolution. Wherever time is not available, the result is revolution” (Miklos, pp. 16-17).

The Iranian case fits the description offered by Miklos and Huntington, but significant differences between the two regimes’ structures persuade me that Saudi Arabia is not on the brink of destruction, nor collapsing from within, “just like Iran.” Certainly some similarities between pre-revolutionary Iran and contemporary Saudi Arabia emerge from the preceding analysis—both are rentier states; both aim first at regime survival; and both command substantial armed forces—but the differences suggest to me that the Al Saud have time. These differences can be summarized as follows:

1. There is no autonomous, cohesive opposition group threatening the Saudi regime. Saudi reformers take pains to state their case for reform within the current system. Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) has been marginalized, and the reform movement is fractious.
2. Saudi society is evolving incrementally, unlike Iranian society whose ability to withstand the disruptions of change was outpaced by the modernizing surge imposed by the Shah.
3. The Saudi regime is well integrated with society and exercises patronage over its power centers, whereas the shah disregarded, disparaged, or failed to recognize

- Iranian centers of power and so either could not, or would not, integrate with society, relying instead on a small group of men whose loyalty was assured to administer the modern institutions of the state.
4. The Shah was a true autocrat and disregarded popular opinion and sentiment, whereas the Al Saud are more paternalistic and pay careful attention to it so as to avoid unnecessary conflict. The Saudi tradition of consensus-based leadership also contrasts starkly with the shah's willful appointment of those who would tell him what he wanted to hear.
 5. Both dynasties were established by conquest, but the Al Saud have tribal roots, and strong patron-client and intermarriage ties, whereas the shah cultivated no ties to powerful Iranian social groups.
 6. The shah based his legitimacy on his Persian forebears and coercive power, while the Al Saud base theirs on shared religious and tribal ties. This affords the Al Saud breathing room during times of prolonged interruption of rents. The strength of these ties endured a decade of severe testing during the 1990s which saw high debt, low oil prices, and contested Islamic credentials after the regime invited American armed forces to establish and maintain bases in Saudi Arabia.
 7. The Iranian state depended on the shah's presence. Not so the Saudi state, where there is every indication that succession, for the current generation, is agreed upon and that both Crown Prince Abdullah and his successor will be able to assume the throne without significant disruptions (ICG, 2004a; Gause, 2004; Cordesman, 2002; Kipper, 2005a and 2005b).

In short, the Saudi royal family is heavily integrated into society, but the shah was not. This failure of the shah's modern state to integrate with society was a critical factor in the success of the opposition. Jeff Goodwin, in a well-respected study of revolutions, supports this assertion: "Revolutions are unlikely, in fact, where the state has institutional linkages with nonelite groups, is organized in a rational-bureaucratic fashion, and effectively governs throughout the entire territory of the national society" (Goodwin, 2001, p. 27). The significance of Goodwin's comment for the Iranian case is that it was

Khomeini, not the shah, who was able—by mobilizing all the resources available to him through the mosque, bazaar, and intelligentsia networks—to build a coalition which cut across all levels of Iranian society.

Clearly, then, opposition groups in an authoritarian state can sometimes accumulate a significant amount of power. But this happens rarely enough that, if that power becomes sufficient to challenge the state's monopoly on coercive, institutional, and economic power, it is a newsworthy event. While states are certainly constrained by external threats and a limited treasury, the balance of power clearly favors the state over the opposition: the state appoints military leaders; state institutions control the budget and expenditures; the state dispenses funds which employ large numbers of people, provide education, and house the poor; commercial regulations and trade relationships are controlled by the government, which also holds the levers of police power.

One factor in state's structure is the context in which the regime exists and functions. I will describe the Iranian and Saudi contexts in terms of history, national society, and regime ends and means. This chapter will demonstrate how state structure contributed to one regime's loss of power, how the other maintains its current grip, and will assess the durability of that grip. "The state" can also be classified, at one end of a spectrum, as a liberal democracy, which tends to institute checks and balances on the use of state power by any individual or office, or, on the other end, as an authoritarian regime dominated by an autocrat who is able to use all or some of these advantages to preserve its power. Both the pre-revolutionary Iranian regime and the current Saudi state tend towards the latter. An equally important distinction to make about state structure is the extent to which it can be described as extractive or distributive. This element of state structure bears heavily on the degree to which the state is integrated with society, which is directly related to the government's ability to weather troubled times (Robinson, 2005b). Special mention is made below of extractive and distributive states before addressing pre-revolutionary Iranian, and current Saudi state structures.

B. EXTRACTIVE AND DISTRIBUTIVE STATE STRUCTURES

The terms extractive and distributive refer essentially to where governments get their revenues from, and what they do with them. An extractive state, such as the United States and other developed, capitalist states, extracts a significant percentage of its revenue from its citizens and their commercial interests via taxes, then redistributes those funds in some form of state expenditures for services such as education, infrastructure, or healthcare. This interaction is illustrated in Figure 3. While the state retains a monopoly on coercive force, it does not have to rely on *physical* coercion as a first resort in order to collect taxes or conduct other measures which the population finds objectionable. Society, in turn, through political activism, holds the state accountable for the expenditure of the funds it relinquishes, and the (often acrimonious) debate about the amounts and targets of both extraction and expenditure result in pact-making, which binds state and society tightly together.

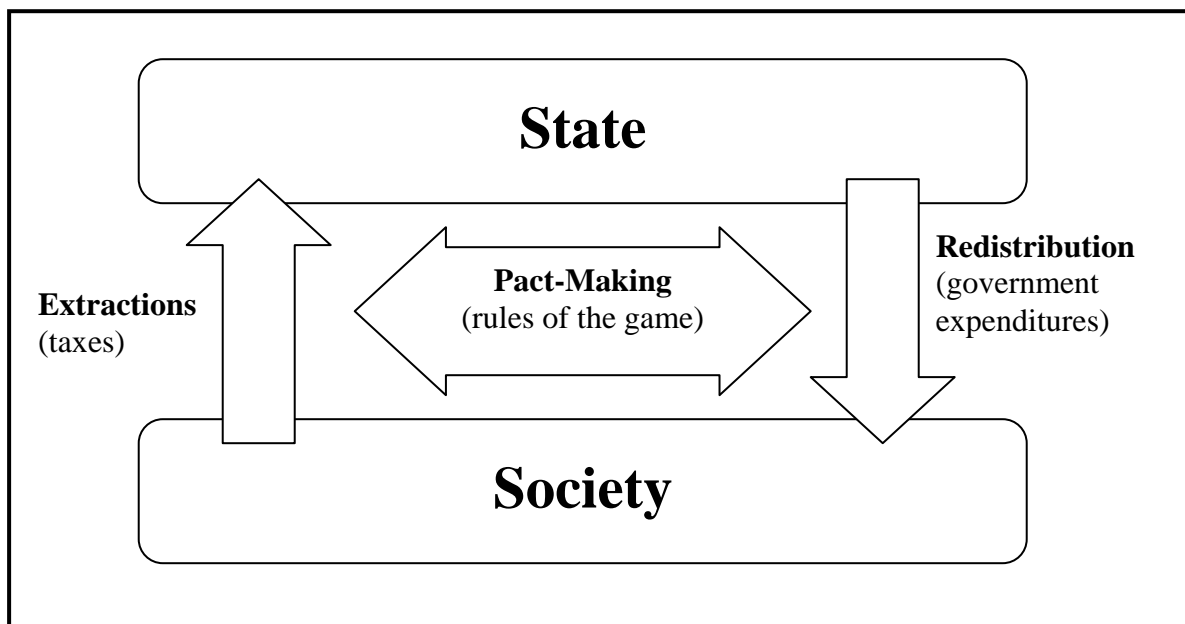


Figure 3 State-Society Relations in Extractive States³⁵

Strong state-society integration engenders political participation and accountability, and thereby produces stability. Such states tend to be democratic and capitalistic.

³⁵ Glenn E. Robinson, unpublished

Distributive states, also known as Rentier states, do not extract a significant portion of revenue via taxes, depending instead on rents. The source is most often a natural resource such as oil, minerals, or precious metals, but can also be a state's foreign policy, the "sale" of which garners massive amounts of foreign financial aid for the seller via state-to-state transfers.

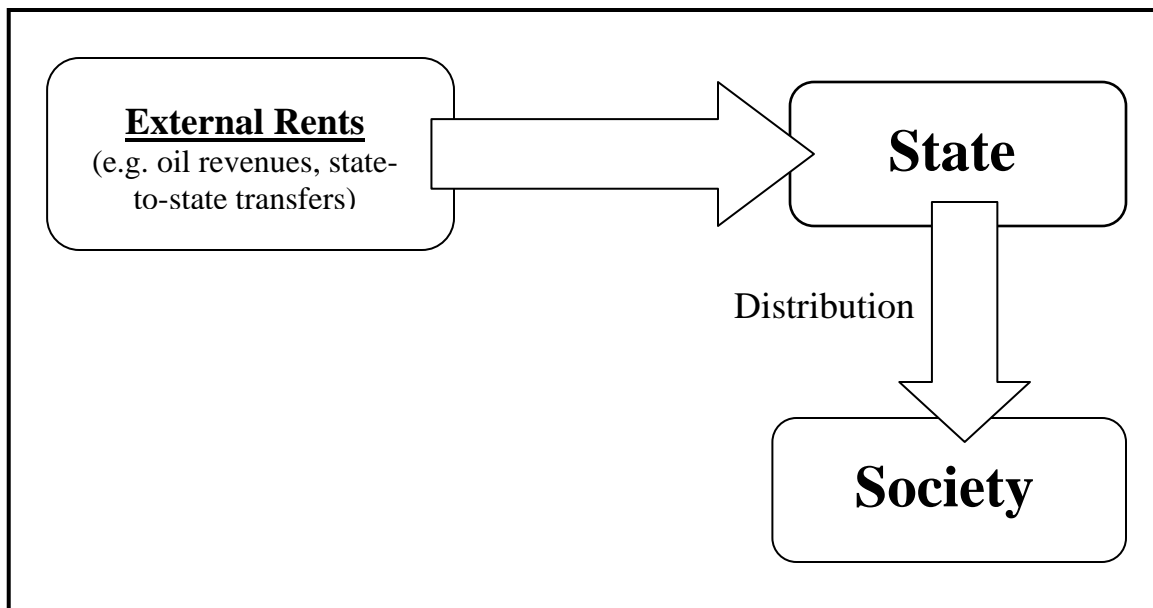


Figure 4 State-Society Relations in Distributive (or Rentier) States³⁶

As shown in Figure 4, the government distributes these rents by providing services to society, or to select social groups, in a system of state patronage. A sufficient and steady flow of rents, therefore, produces a quiescent citizenry that is dependent on government and therefore unlikely to rock the proverbial boat by opposing government policy. Low societal political participation yields an equivalent low level of government accountability and transparency, both of which combine to create weak state-society integration. The unfortunate consequence of such weak integration is that a prolonged interruption of rents results inevitably in a prolonged interruption of state patronage, which produces political and social instability.

³⁶ Glenn E. Robinson, unpublished

C. STRUCTURE OF THE IRANIAN STATE

As mentioned previously, one cannot adequately describe a regime's structure without first establishing the historical and social context in which it existed, along with the regime's ends and means. These factors overlap and intertwine, but ultimately, in the Iranian case, describe an authoritarian, distributive state with weak connections between the regime and society.

1. Context

The context in which the shah operated was shaped by Iran's historic legacy as the great Persian civilization, by a transitional society, a reinvented monarchy, and by religion. Miklos (p. 20) reinforces the latter pair: "Two of the most powerful threads that run through Iran's history are religion and the monarchy. Sometimes allied, sometimes at cross purposes, they have shaped the destiny and character of the Persians from the outset." The shah drew on the monarchic legacy of Iran's illustrious Persian history to justify his absolute rule and in his attempts to gain popular support for his reforms. These were designed to pull Iran from the third world back into global prominence. To achieve this end the shah had to impose modernity on a traditional society, forcing it to transition from the old status quo to a new one. This process was begun by the shah's father, Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Reza Shah Pahlavi was an autocratic modernizer. A contemporary of modern Turkey's founder Kemal Ataturk, he seized power after WWI and began reforms designed to revive Iran's position in the modern world. Kamrava (1990) provides a useful summary of this era:

The Pahlavi era marked the establishment of a highly differentiated and structurally strong political system in Iran...[D]uring Reza Shah's reign between 1921 and 1941, most of the basic institutions needed for the elementary needs of society were created. Reza Shah did not so much establish these institutions but rather secularized them by transferring their control from the [clerics] over to the state, a task in which he often used brutal tactics. Such newly secularized institutions included the educational, administrative, health, and judicial systems, most of which were often modeled after those in Europe. Some other institutions,

notably the military and the state bureaucracy, were rebuilt almost entirely and created anew (p. 14).

Overcoming the inertia of the traditional status quo demanded an authoritarian regime with a firm grip on the states coercive instruments. Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi followed in his father's autocratic footsteps. Miklos (p. 16), writing on the subject of modernization and Iran, states that "...leaders of traditional societies today seem to have little choice but to attempt to promote social and economic reform. To achieve this they are generally forced to the conclusion that they must resort to authoritarian measures which are effective because they rest on centralized power." While Iran has a long history of monarchical rule, Halliday (1979, pp. 29, 30) points out that the Pahlavi dynasty ruled a much different Iran than did their predecessors. Under the Pahlavis Iran became a capitalist nation-state which controlled its entire territory and maintained a large standing army, rather than an earlier pre-capitalist state which did not extend far beyond urban areas and did not support any significant armed force.

Pahlavi authoritarianism and modernizing ambition also extended to the economy. Many third-world economies were transformed by colonialism, but Iran was never subject to a western colonial power—neither the negative aspects of social and cultural upheaval, nor the economic transformation required to meet the economic requirements of the more developed capitalist countries" (Halliday, 1979, p. 31). "The shah in the 1970s nevertheless voiced the expectation that Iran would become one of the world's five top powers in this century: such a fantasy encouraged heavy collaboration with multinational corporations and short shrift for the everyday needs of most Iranians" (Keddie, 1981, pp. 169-70). Substantial oil revenues, monopolized and distributed by the state alone, fueled the shah's ambition. But the oil industry did not encourage the growth of a strong, autonomous bourgeoisie class because employees were on the state payroll. Bureaucrats in the various administrative offices of the Iranian state formed another non-autonomous portion of the middle class. Miklos (1983) observes the growth and modern character of these administrators:

The advent of modernizing reform accelerated the development of the middle class, but one different in character from the old bourgeoisie. Few of the earlier middle class had a Western education. The essential

qualification for admittance to the new professional/bureaucratic middle class was a Western education or a similar kind of education...Students sent abroad for their university education formed, on their return, the core of the new professional middle class (p. 25).

Authoritarianism, therefore, went hand-in-hand with Iran's transitional society as modern institutions and customs were imposed on the majority of society by a relatively small middle class of Iranians.

What the regime lacked in popular support it made up for through international allies, particularly the United States. Iran's abundant natural resources and its strategic position between Russia and the Gulf ensured that the US foreign policy would "allocate...a major role" to Iran (Halliday, 1979, p. 32). Indeed, US patronage enabled the Iranian regime to overcome the three major challenges to its survival since WWII. The first of these threats was the allied occupation during WWII when the Allies invaded Iran to provide supplies to Russian front. The state was politically discredited because of its failure to resist the foreign armies and the first Pahlavi shah was exiled. His son, Mohammad Reza, then aged twenty-two, assumed the throne, which was further undermined when the Anglo-Russian occupiers permitted political freedoms to the opposition by restoring trade unions, a free press, and permitting political parties.

The US propped up the young shah with military and financial aid, and declared that Iran would receive US assistance against anti-communist forces (Halliday, 1979, p. 24). The second US intervention occurred in 1951, as the Cold War intensified. Mohammad Mosaddeq was elected Prime Minister with the backing of the communist-leaning Tudeh Party. He promptly nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and was unable to convince the US that he was not opening Iran up to communist influence.³⁷ Mosaddeq was ousted in a 1953 coup, in which the CIA had an active role.³⁸ With

³⁷ American anti-communism was at a peak during this time, following on the heels of McCarthyism and China's communist revolution.

³⁸ Gasiorowski (2004) details the CIA's activities in Operation Ajax, concluding that the CIA was certainly instrumental in the success of the coup, "we have no way to determine the extent to which Iranian actors...independently contributed to them" (p. 259). He states that Mosaddeq's tactical errors, and luck on the part of Mosaddeq's opponents as equally instrumental factors in the coup's success. According to Arjomand, Halliday, and others, the CIA's role in the coup is exaggerated by both Iranian conspiracy theorists and the CIA. While the CIA certainly had an active role, the fact that Mosaddeq's support among both the general public and Iranian elites was already waning was equally important.

Mosaddeq's demise the shah regained absolute power and "the Pahlavi state emerged "stronger than it had been prior to the oil [nationalization] crisis" (Halliday, 1979, p. 26). The US role in the regime's third crisis was to tie its patronage to reforms intended to move Iran further away from communism. The shah thus initiated his White Revolution, which included some land reform and made some cosmetic efforts to reduce both corruption and military spending but which did not really impede his consolidation of power. As mentioned in Chapter II, some of these reforms impinged on the traditional spheres of significant segments of Iranian society. The consequent popular opposition which broke out in 1963 was bloodily suppressed by the army, and the path was thus cleared of any obstacles which remained in the way of the shah's modernization agenda (Halliday, 1979, pp. 25-27). US involvement in Iran, although pursuing its own interests in maintaining a patronizing relationship with a non-communist country of such strategic significance, nevertheless impacted the Iranian political context by helping, at critical junctures, to either preserve or strengthen an otherwise vulnerable Iranian regime.

Besides modernization and restoration of Persian greatness, the Iranian context was influenced by religion. Arjomand (1988), commenting on the revolution's cause, notes that it was a thoroughly modern event in that centralization of the state and the subsequent transformation of society brought the state into conflict with a longstanding institution of Iranian society:

Islamic ideology, which has determined the *direction* (emphasis mine) of the Iranian revolution...could not have succeeded without the unusual institutional assets of its proponents, the Shi'ite men of religion. The story of the Islamic revolution in Iran must therefore begin with the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion in 1501 [and includes] the consolidation of Shi'ite clerical power and the prevalence of a dual system of authority until the onset of centralization and the expansion of the power of the state (p. 5).

Under both Pahlavis the ulama's traditional sphere of influence was incrementally, but methodically, diminished. Under Reza Shah they lost control over education and judicial systems as well as their partnership and access to Iranian political elites. The White Revolution's land reforms resulted in the ulama's loss of both endowed religious estates and the revenue stream from landholding religious foundations

(Arjomand, 1988, pp. 193-94; Miklos, 1983, p. 30). The regime also established religious organizations to propagandize the Iranian populace with the state's official version of Shi'ism. Eventually, then, the modernizing state's encroachment on the ulama's interests, along with a broader cultural and moral decay (from the ulama's perspective), produced a religious network in Iran that became destabilizing (Denoeux, p. 170). The contextual significance of religion to Iran's structure is simply that, despite the shah's reforms, and attempts to secularize the religious establishment, Iranian clerics maintained the deepest reservoir of Iranian tradition and identity, against which the shah had to shape his regime in order to bring Iran into modern prominence.

Another important segment of society that was negatively affected by the shah's reforms was the bazaar community. The bazaar was able to adapt to the changing economic environment imposed by the shah, although its economic clout declined relative to the oil-dominated economy of the 1960s and 1970s. Modernization meant for the bazaar a series of seemingly arbitrary tax laws and commercial restraints, and worst of all the shah's anti-profiteering campaign of 1975-76, which caused untold (and unjust) hardship, imprisonment, or molestation for hundreds of bazaaris. As Denoeux (p. 147) puts it, bazaaris united in opposition to the state because:

[T]he state was interfering with the market in a way that not only damaged their opportunities for profit, but made it difficult for them to operate at all. Important as well was the regime's frequently expressed contempt for the *bazaaris* and their "worm-ridden shops," as the shah once referred to them. The Iranian ruler missed few opportunities to portray the *bazaaris* as a reactionary group opposed to change and constituting an obstacle to the country's socioeconomic modernization. These attacks were offensive to the *bazaaris*' sense of self-worth and fostered their anger at the regime.

The regime's two main ends, modernization and regime preservation, have been mentioned already in the preceding discussion and are woven into the context in which the Iranian regime found itself in the 1970s. What remains is to see *how* the regime was structured in order to achieve these ends. After the shah survived the 1960-63 challenge to his regime not only was domestic opposition effectively nullified but the shah also enjoyed foreign support. This enabled the shah to increasingly accrue power, and the Iranian state became ever more centralized and repressive. But centralization is no

panacea, as Arjomand notes: “Centralization of monarchical states reduces the degree of pluralism in society and increases its political fragility. Among the political regimes of the modern world, monarchies are especially fragile and vulnerable to revolution. They have the property of focusing discontent on a single person (1988, p. 189).

Three principal foundations emerged, upon which were laid the state that subsequently emerged. First was the shah himself. “By installing himself at its apex and by making all other institutions dependent on his Court, the Shah became an integral part of the state” (Kamrava, p. 16). A second basis was Iran’s administrative network, comprised of the cabinet, the Rastakhiz party, the Majlis, and the bureaucracy. Third, “the state relied on a number of military and paramilitary institutions, the most notable of which were the armed forces and SAVAK” (Kamrava, p. 17). A description of these foundations follows.

2. The Shah

The shah was the apex of the regime. “The Shah himself believed that he could sustain the Pahlavi dynasty only if he directly intervened in the country’s political process. Accordingly, the personal power of the Shah increased after 1953, while virtually all other institutions lost effective authority and political relevance” (Kamrava, p. 16). The Shah occupied himself with running the daily affairs of the country, taking a special interest in the ministries of War and Foreign Affairs, the appointed leaders of which he met with daily. Besides these portfolios, however, the Shah not only appointed his selections to ministerial, military, and ambassadorial posts, but also chaired weekly meetings of Iran’s High Council of Economics, “which comprised the Ministers of mines and industries, commerce, labour [sic], economics and financial affairs, the prime minister, and the heads of the central bank and the Budget Plan Organization” (Kamrava, p. 18). The emerging image of the shah as a domineering micro-manager is embellished by his customary halo of experienced and trusted political veterans. Although the shah was a yeoman-like worker, his early political experiences rendered him mistrustful of, and intimidated by, more experienced politicians. Predictably, then, the shah heard only what his advisors thought he wanted to hear. But more importantly, says Arjomand, “In curbing all independent group formation, and in following the principle of divide and rule

within Iranian society, the Shah failed to build a constituency capable of concerted action on his behalf among any major social group” (1988, p. 107).

3. The Administrative Network

The shah’s administrative network consisted chiefly of his cabinet, the Rastakhiz party, the majlis (or parliament) and the bureaucracy.

a. The Cabinet

For the greater part of the shah’s modernization program which got underway in the early 1960s, the cabinet’s chief function was to oversee the vast state bureaucracy while the shah exercised tight control over the most important ministries. Kamrava (p. 19) describes the various tiers of influence:

The ministries of war, foreign affairs, the Court, and finance (whose minister represented Iran at OPEC) were in constant contact with the Shah. The Shah also gave top priority to those ministries that were responsible for the economic development of the country. Representative of this group were the ministries that comprised the High Council of Economics. All other ministries served mere administrative functions. They included the ministries of culture and arts; health; housing and town planning; transportation; post, telephone, and telegraph; energy; information and tourism; justice; and the ministry of state for executive affairs.

While it is not unusual for cabinet members with influential portfolios in any government to be in more frequent contact with the chief executive than those with less visible responsibilities, the extent of the shah’s control and attention rendered the cabinet ineffective.

b. The Rastakhiz Party

The single political party permitted by the shah was his own creation. He dissolved Iran’s two legal parties in 1975 and replaced them with a single, all-inclusive party, the Rastakhiz. The party was essentially part of the government establishment, despite the shah’s initial attempt to create a political body which would add legitimacy to his autocratic regime, as well as early support from educated Iranians. At the beginning, the party was considered to be a reliable governmental organ “through which the political order could be gradually reformed while the general status quo was maintained. But ...

disenchantment with Rastakhiz soon set in as the party was bureaucratized and became another component of the state administration” (Kamrava, p. 21). Intellectuals became disillusioned with the party because it lost its original ideological appeal and came to symbolize the shah’s despised political structure. The middle and upper-middle classes ridiculed Rastakhiz as just one more of the shah’s “deceitful gimmicks” (Kamrava, pp. 21-22).

c. The Majlis

Although the Iranian government was constitutionally responsible to the Majlis (the parliament), after Mosaddeq was overthrown in 1953 real political power had steadily been transferred from the parliament to the shah’s appointed Prime Minister:

[B]y the time Prime Minister Hoveida departed from office in 1977 the Majlis resembled anything but a parliament. Neither of the chambers wielded any meaningful degree of influence and the activities of their deputies were almost exclusively limited to voicing non-political and regionally confined concerns of some of their constituents (Kamrava, p. 23).

A pattern should now be observable: neither the cabinet, nor the party, nor parliament was capable under the shah of representing the regime to society in a meaningful or sympathetic way. Nor did these bodies facilitate a means for the true needs, sentiments, or grievances to reach the shah. The institution with the best potential to have a finger on the pulse of Iranian society was the bureaucracy.

d. The Bureaucracy

“The importance of the bureaucracy to the Pahlavi state was paramount,” says Kamrava (p. 23). The shah’s modernizing ambitions demanded a large number of government representatives to actually publicize and carry out the reforms. To this end, each government ministry established offices throughout Iran.

The Court, totalitarian and absolutist in nature, was bent on modernizing Iran socially and economically, but not politically. In attempting to preserve his traditional centre [sic] of political authority in a rapidly changing transitional society, and in order to counter the image of despotism and oligarchy that surrounded his court, the Shah tended to put greater emphasis and reliance on the bureaucracy rather than the military. The state bureaucracy also served as a channel through which new members were recruited into the power elite (Kamrava, pp. 23, 24).

Ultimately, however, through rampant corruption³⁹, inefficiency, nepotism, and unproductivity, the members of the bureaucracy became symbols of the shah's apparent disregard for the masses of Iranians who had not completed the transition from traditional to modern society (Kamrava, p. 24).

4. Military / Paramilitary Institutions

The military and paramilitary forces over whom the shah exercised control consisted of the regular armed forces and SAVAK, the secret police. Both remained intact and loyal to the shah until he abandoned his goal of preserving his regime and fled in early 1979.

a. Armed Forces

The Pahlavi state owed the armed forces its existence. The first Pahlavi Shah came to power via a military *coup*, and his son recovered the throne in 1953 when the military helped oust Prime Minister Mosaddeq. "By the mid-1970s, when the Shah's thirty-five year reign was nearing an end, the institutions of the monarchy and the military were completely intertwined, and as the course of events during the revolution demonstrated, the strength and the survival of one directly depended on that of the other" (Kamrava, p. 25). The military establishment was, consequently, the shah's most trusted arm of the state.

Although military officers enjoyed both social prestige and many privileges, they were beholden to the shah, who was known "to have been the ultimate source of authority and to have frequently given orders regarding the day-to-day running of the various branches" (Kamrava, p. 26). He was also intimately involved in officers' promotions (as well as their demotions if the shah saw fit). The shah sometimes made senior appointments based on the personal animosity one top commander might feel towards another, in order to minimize the risk of collaboration against him. "[A]rmy officers had a strong sense of professional identity, but no attachment to any [single]

³⁹ Commercial licensing was a primary venue for corruption. "Although legally a company did not need a license in order to operate, any sizeable company did need one to import, export, or deal with the government. Government licenses were given out only to a few companies in each field....The need to get and keep a license, like many other government rules, required that top persons in a company spend much time in Tehran cultivating one or more leading people in order to insure the receipt of a license or other needed favors....[Corruption] made the culpable more subject to royal control" (Keddie, 1981, p.172).

social group, nor to any organized interests...They could not act against [the shah], but they could not act for themselves or for any other group either” (Arjomand, 1988, p. 190). The Army’s inability or unwillingness to act unilaterally became evident in late 1978 as opposition demonstrations increased in intensity and the shah vacillated between repression and accommodation. Through it all, and despite outrage among some generals, the Army remained intact, suffering relatively few defections or incidents of sabotage against the regime (Arjomand, pp. 119-21).

b. SAVAK

The Iranian security apparatus, SAVAK, was established by the shah in 1957 as a bulwark against what he called ‘anti-state’ activists, both domestic and abroad. Besides a reported counter-intelligence role against Soviet spies in Iran, SAVAK had two main functions: “the identification and often the arrest of ‘anti-state elements’, especially members of the two guerrilla organizations, the [Mojahedin] and the Fedaiyan; and the placement of operatives within the bureaucracy to prevent the state’s infiltration by those not loyal to the Crown” (Kamrava, p. 27). SAVAK was remarkably successful in their brutal and ubiquitous efforts to suppress the Iranian opposition. Iranian society, however, feared and/or loathed SAVAK—its personnel were favorite targets for reprisal as the revolution escalated.

The regime’s shallow foundation of power was revealed as 1978 progressed. Arjomand (1988) describes a neo-patrimonial state as characteristically fragile because “government is extremely personal and the chief executive encourages divisions within the army and the political elite in order to rule. Such neo-patrimonial states are particularly prone to collapse and ensuing revolution once the ruler breaks down” (pp. 189-90). Thus, as tensions mounted, the shah vacillated, and the radical clerics gained an unmistakable advantage, the shah removed the sycophantic prime minister, Hoveida, and replaced him with Jamshid Amuzegar. The new prime minister attempted to solve the crisis through technical solutions and did little to engage the increasingly vocal opposition (Kamrava, p. 29). Amuzegar proved ineffective at keeping Khomeini and the emerging opposition from exploiting and compounding the systemic flaws in the system. On top of the negative cycle of events internally, the Iranian regime

was deflated by a prolonged decline in oil prices as well as the Carter administration's abandonment of the 'Nixon Doctrine'⁴⁰. Thus, as both internal and external pressures mounted, the state's utter dependence on the personality of the shah, his continued presence, his state of mind, and his decrees became obvious. The shah's self-imposed micro-management of the state was also evident as the state's administrative apparatus devolved into chaos, "embodying an uncoordinated cabinet, a farcical political party, a symbolic parliament, and an inept and overgrown bureaucracy" (Kamrava, p. 30).

The two key observations in the preceding discussion are, (1) the shah made himself an integral part of the state; and (2) the state utterly relied on his presence in order to function. The shah was, in effect, a single point of failure for the state. Moreover, the shah had very little insight or connections into other power centers in Iran—the informal networks of the mosque and bazaar—dismissing such power centers as anachronisms. Iran's rentier economy (see Figure 4) did not produce natural linkages between state and society. Nor does the evidence suggest that the shah was in any way attempting or intending to implement a robust tax-collection scheme—creating an extractive state (accountable to society) would have run counter to one of the shah's main goals: regime preservation. The shah could not, however, reconcile this goal with his other main ambition: modernization.

Unfortunately for the shah, it was the very institutions of modernizing government—bureaucratic ministries; the army; and his legendary secret police, SAVAK (Denoeux, p. 128)—and the enforcement of modernizing policies, which aggrieved the population and added power to the opposition through informal networks. Chapter II's description of Iran's bazaar and mosque networks showed that the shah's ultimate demise was connected to his...

failure to rely on effective political organizations and/or well-established patronage networks...to provide a bridge between the regime and the urban population, and to compensate for the absence of formally

⁴⁰ In May 1972 Nixon visited Iran and, as part of a post-Vietnam foreign policy strategy which relied on regional "pillars" (instead of US expeditionary forces) to secure American interests, informed the Shah that the US was prepared to sell him 'any conventional weapons systems it wanted'. "This signaled the emergence of more complex relations between the two states," according to Bashiriyyeh (p. 35). The other regional pillar, incidentally, was Saudi Arabia.

organized political groups binding the monarchy to the modern middle class, the *bazaari* and religious communities, the working class, and uprooted peasants (Denoeux, p. 102).

Gause (1992, p. 461) contends that “increased state capacity is not a foolproof guarantee of regime stability. The increasing role of the state can politicize people in opposition to regimes.” The Iranian case bears him out.

D. STRUCTURE OF THE SAUDI ARABIAN STATE

If Iran’s revolution was a function of the regime’s lack of integration with society, the obvious question with regard to contemporary Saudi Arabia is how well the Saudi regime is integrated with Saudi society. Although Saudi Arabia is somewhat similar to the shah’s Iran—it is also a distributive state, and is undergoing rapid urbanization—the Al Saud have forged connections with Saudi society which shield it from the institutional vulnerability of the shah’s regime. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has its own unique historical and social context within which the regime exists and functions. Two other critical factors in the structure of the Saudi regime are the powerful monarch and state patronage.

1. Context

The Saudi context is shaped by the kingdom’s short modern history and its society, including tribal ties and the dominant role of Islam. These factors in turn affect both the ends sought by the regime, and the means by which the regime seeks to achieve them.

a. History

Three aspects of Saudi Arabia’s history bear mention: conquest by the Al Saud, the discovery of oil, and the formation of the Saudi nation state.

Whereas Iran has an extensive history as an ancient civilization, Saudi Arabia as it is known today was unified only in the 1920s, under Abd al Aziz, a member of the Al Saud family and a descendant of Muhammad ibn Saud—the Al Saud sheikh who first conquered parts of the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century. From exile in Kuwait Abd al Aziz began his conquest of the al Rashid tribe, beginning in the Najd—

a central desert region of the Arabian Peninsula and the traditional homeland of the Al Saud. Over time Abd al Aziz conquered most of the Arabian Peninsula (calling this territory Saudi Arabia) and asserting his leadership over Saudi Arabia's tribes. Unlike the shah, therefore, the Al Saud had no legacy besides conquest on which to justify their monarchy, leaving them in search of legitimacy.

Oil has also affected Saudi Arabia only recently. In 1938, shortly after Abd al Aziz formed the nation, and while the Saudi population was still small and pastoral, American geologists discovered oil. Oil not only transformed the Saudi state financial system into a modern, rentier economy, but also fundamentally altered Saudi society by undercutting tribes' economic autonomy.

The rebuilding of Europe after World War II and its need for cheap, reliable sources of oil greatly enhanced the position of the newly established Saudi Arabian oil industry. The quantum jump in revenues that flowed into the treasury of Abd al Aziz...fortified his position and allowed the king to exert greater political and economic control over the territories he had conquered. At the apex of the economy was the state with all the mechanisms needed to ensure the rule of [Al Saud]. The state became the widespread agent of economic change, replacing the traditional economy with one that depended primarily on the state's outlays (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

As noted in the previous discussion, a major weakness of a rentier economy is that it does not foster strong integrating ties between the state and society.

State-building is always messy. Europe's nation states, for example, took centuries to develop, and began with forceful conquest. In the beginning, then, state legitimacy derives from the state's coercive power. Over time, though, legitimacy develops as the state proves able to protect and provide for its citizens. The state's ability to do so, however, depends on access to resources. These resources must either be extracted from the citizens, or, as in the Saudi case with the discovery of oil, abundantly available and controllable by the state. In either case a bureaucracy is required, either to extract taxes or to distribute received rents. While Europe's states had centuries to develop, nations which come late to the game, so to speak, typically have their development interrupted, influenced, and intervened upon by outside forces (Lustick, 1997). Despite keen external interest in Saudi Arabia's oil from the industrialized world,

however, the Al Saud have succeeded far more than other Middle Eastern states in insulating the kingdom from western influence. Even so, Saudi Arabia's rapid ascent from being a desert wasteland inhabited by nomads to global economic prominence shapes the context in which the regime operates because the Al Saud had to structure the state being mindful of both its conservative, traditional society and the modern, cosmopolitan outside world.

b. Saudi Society

Despite the intrusion of a modern economy and the introduction of a central, patronistic government, Saudi society is in many ways still very traditional. The social context in which the regime operates is affected chiefly by Islam and tribal ties.

Islam is central both to Saudi society and to the regime's legitimacy. The latter is a significant difference between the Saudi and Iranian cases. In the latter, the Shi'ite hierarchy was effectively autonomous from the state. As demonstrated in Chapter II, autonomy was a critical factor in the clerics' leadership in the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The Saudi religious establishment is wholly different, and has been so since Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a puritanical scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, met in the Arabian desert in the eighteenth century. Wahhabi doctrine stated that Muslims "must present a *bayah*, or oath of allegiance, to a Muslim ruler during his lifetime to ensure his redemption after death. The ruler, conversely, is owed unquestioned allegiance from his people so long as he leads the community according to the laws of God" (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005). The alliance formed between the two men essentially secured Saudi patronage of Abd al-Wahhab in exchange for the political legitimacy afforded by the latter's doctrine. Thus, centuries later, "specific Islamic themes are an integral part of the ruling ideology, stemming from the historic alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1745. Saudi rulers have continued to affirm the importance of this ideological basis for their rule, even as they have endeavored to bring the ulama more and more under state control" (Gause, 1994, p. 29). As Gause also notes (1994, p. 31), however, appropriating Islam to secure legitimacy makes it easy for opponents to point out where the rulers fall short of the strict, but self-imposed, Islamic standards the rulers promote. Islam also

shapes the political context because, although the Saudi monarchy is absolute, “their power [is] tempered by Islamic law (sharia) and by the custom of reaching consensus on political issues among the scores of direct adult male descendants of Abd al Aziz” (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

Although oil revenue enabled Abd al Aziz to undermine the traditional client-patron relationships that shaped traditional-Saudi society, tribal identity remains pivotal in tying together the Saudi state and society. These relationships emerged from frequent raids, which conferred status on successful tribes and also served as a mechanism for economic distribution. Weaker tribes sometimes sought protection from stronger tribes, establishing a patron-client relationship in which the protector obliged himself to spare the protected tribe’s property and protect it from other raiders. The protector, moreover, could only secure his influence among his own tribe by distributing the protection-payment to his fellow tribesmen. “These client-patron relationships based on payment of protection money were undermined by Abd al Aziz in the 1920s when he released weaker tribes from obligations to stronger ones and made himself the sole source of wealth redistributed from the spoils of raiding, and then later from oil profits” (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

The Saudi regime is acutely aware of the state’s power centers, appointing members of the vast royal family to positions of influence in the capital, the provinces, and in most government ministries. While the system achieves the regime’s desire for stability, the system also lends itself to administrative inefficiency and also presents appointees with easy avenues to corruption and abuse of power. “Beneath the major princes, thousands of second generation and minor royal family members also have claims on the system and in many cases use state mechanisms to achieve or enhance personal interests” (ICG, 2004a). The early alliance between the political and religious founders of Saudi Arabia is reflected in the appointment of members of the Al al-Shaykh family⁴¹ to positions of prominence as the justice minister and as *mufti*, the country’s highest religious authority (ICG, 2004a).

⁴¹ The descendents of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab are known as the Al al-Shaykh

The two remaining elements of the Saudi political context are the regime's ends and means. The former will be addressed briefly here, and a discussion of the state's means for achieving its goals follows later. The regime's goals are difficult to accurately discern. This is not for lack of published plans with respect to the economy, counter-terrorism, or municipal elections, but rather because the pronouncements of the state are, often enough, based more on political expediency than intended action. The regime's true intentions, on the other hand, remain opaque to both the average Saudi and the foreign observer. "We won't ever know the inner workings of the Saudi decision process," says Judith Kipper (2005b) of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Several notable observers, moreover, conclude that "Those who know aren't talking, and those who are talking don't know"⁴². Clearly, however, the first, and overarching, goal of the regime must be survival—maintaining the monarchy in the Al Saud family. The second goal, closely tied to the first, appears to be to maintain the political status quo, giving up absolute power (through democratic reforms or otherwise) only incrementally⁴³ and only in the interest of the first goal. The Al Saud are not in danger of being voted out of office, or (since Saddam Hussein's demise) of being invaded by an external force, but the regime appears to recognize that the status quo demands a reciprocal commitment to maintain the Islamic character of the Kingdom and to meet the needs of ordinary Saudis. These aspects of legitimacy are embodied in the Saudi regime structure, which can be described by two complementary characteristics: a powerful monarchy and state patronage.

2. A Powerful Monarchy

"Autocracy", or "absolute monarchy," as understood in the west, may well be misnomers when describing the Saudi monarchy. To be sure, the king is the ultimate source of state power and the royal family has great authority and freedom of action. But the regime's power is limited "by other power centers within the royal family, by

⁴² Based on conversations with Gregory Gause, Judith Kipper, Anthony Cordesman, and Toby Jones (of the International Crisis Group) in May, 2005.

⁴³ Promised reforms often either don't occur at all in the Kingdom, or take place at a glacial pace, leading Judith Kipper to comment that, "Doing nothing is doing something in Saudi Arabia" (2005a and 2005b).

religion, by custom, and by the need for [a] high degree of consensus within Saudi Arabia's key tribes, technocrats, business leaders, and religious figures. The Saud family...has long had to seek to achieve and preserve a broad social and political consensus" (Cordesman, 2002).

The tribal leader, the shaykh⁴⁴, governs by consensus. Shaykhs acquire influence through their ability to mediate disputes and persuade their peers toward a given course of action. The qualities their position demands are a detailed grasp of tribal affairs, a reputation for giving good advice, and generosity. Shaykhs are essentially arbitrators; the process of resolving disputes reflects the tribe's egalitarian ethos. Shaykhs do not lead discussions but carefully ascertain everyone's opinion on a given question. Consensus is necessary before action is taken. To force a decision is to undermine one's influence; leaders are effective only as long as they conform to the tribe's expectations (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

So, while one is tempted to attach the descriptor "mere" to an advisory body like the *majlis-ash-shura*, the *majlis* actually carries some weight. "Its ability to act as an informal check also reflects the fact that the system prizes consensus, strives to maintain harmony through consultation and is deeply averse to conflict" (ICG, 2004a). The International Crisis Group report continues with an example of the "mere" advisory group's ability to shape government policy, in which a member of the *majlis* relates: "We have an understanding with the government. As long as there is no financial transparency, and we don't have all the facts [about the financial affairs of the state], if they come to us asking for taxes or levies, we say no."

The result is that "the Saudi monarchy consists more of patriarchal rule by a consensus-driven extended family with large numbers of alliances to other families, than rule by an autocrat who acts upon his personal desires" (Cordesman, 2002). The Saudi regime therefore pays attention to its citizens, but still brooks no opposition from them. Gause (2002) asks, concerning the strength and stability of an autocratic regime, why the Saudis bother with public opinion. He concludes that the Saudis "surf their public opinion more out of their desire to avoid creating unnecessary problems than fear that an unpopular decision could mean their downfall." While consensual leadership imposes

⁴⁴ Alternatively spelled "sheikh."

some restraint on the regime's power, it also confers upon the Saudi rulers a considerable amount of popular legitimacy.

While legitimacy has a powerful impact on the Saudi regime's survivability, the royal family also exerts firm control over all arms of the state.⁴⁵ Gause (1992, pp. 461-62) writes:

[I]ncreased state capacity since 1970 has helped stabilize regimes in the Arab world, making them less susceptible to pressure based on transnational ideological challenges generated from abroad....The avenues of political change in the Middle East now seem limited to internal processes of reform or revolution. Coup, conspiracy and transnational ideological pressure can no longer alter regimes.

Control over state institutions, according to Quinlavan, enables a ruler to "coup-proof" a regime; i.e. structure it in such a way as to "minimize the possibilities of small groups leveraging the system" to seize the state (Quinlavan, 1999). This "coup-proofed" structure consists of five general characteristics, a discussion of which entails a description of various arms of the state to include administrative, military, and security functions.

(1) Effective exploitation of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties for coup-critical positions balanced with wider participation and less restrictive loyalty standards for the regime as a whole. Since the Al Saud cannot possibly staff entire bureaucracies or armies with members of their immediate tribe, and because Saudi leadership depends on consensus, the ruling family's ability to foster and maintain a complex balance of personal, tribal, religious, and dynastic interests is critical. Ibn Saud set the precedent when he conquered Arabia using the unlikely combination of a small force of tribal warriors, and arranged marriages. "Marriage, even to bereaved relatives of defeated opponents, provided Ibn Saud an effective means of monitoring his enemies. The tribes of the [Najd] made up the human core of Saudi Arabia, while Ibn Saud's numerous

⁴⁵ This includes the religious establishment. Dependent to a degree on the clerics for their Islamic credentials, the Al Saud have nevertheless established supremacy over the ulama, dating back to the late 1920's, when ibn Saud⁴⁵ rallied "loyal tribesmen and townsmen to put down a revolt among his "Wahhabi" shock troops. Abd al-Aziz's success in a series of battles against them established the primacy of his family's rule over those who advocated an unlimited jihad to spread "Wahhabi" doctrine" (Gause, 2002).

progeny comprised the dynasty's human core. Today the Al Saud rule from a base within a family group that is not monolithic" (Quinlavan, p. 138).

(2) *Creation of an armed force parallel to the regular military.* The function of the parallel military is to protect the regime by providing a counterweight to the regular armed forces which are most likely to be involved in a coup—a praetorian guard, as it were. The parallel force must therefore be tightly bound to the regime. The Saudi embodiment of this coup-proofing mechanism is the Saudi National Guard (SANG), commanded by King Abdullah. While the regular Saudi armed forces (commanded not incidentally by another family member, Prince Sultan, the Defense Minister) are composed of men from diverse tribal and regional backgrounds, the SANG is composed of troops from the same tribes that fought with Ibn Saud in 1929 against the rest of the *Ikhwan*—the previously referenced Wahhabi shock troops who originally helped Ibn Saud conquer the Arabian Peninsula but who revolted against his later attempts to restrain their traditional raiding prerogatives. The regular forces are garrisoned and trained to interdict external invaders, while the SANG are purpose-built for defending the royal family and are even garrisoned between the capital and the regular military (Quinlavan, p. 144).

(3) *Development of multiple internal security agencies with overlapping jurisdiction.* The creation of internal security organizations which might report on each other ensures that the various services are both active and loyal to the regime. Saudi Arabia has established three such organs: the Ministry of the Interior, under the leadership of a family member, Prince Naif; the SANG (see above); and the independent religious police, regulated by the clerical establishment (which is funded, in turn, by the state). The regime thus controls, directly or indirectly, all the levers of internal security from local police in urban areas to border patrol units on the periphery of the state (Quinlavan, p. 149).

(4) *Fostering of expertness in the regular military.* The regime clearly has an interest in having a well trained praetorian guard. What is less obvious with regard to a potential military coup is the regime's need for a technically skilled regular military. The reason for this is that it is in the regime's interest for the regular officers to have the

technical skills necessary to make a realistic, worst-case assessment of the combat power and coordination that would be required to overcome the praetorian guard because, “as the number of units required to execute a coup increases, so does the probability that they will be uncovered” by one or more of the aforementioned internal security agencies (Quinlavan, p. 153).

(5) *Financing the above measures.* The fifth characteristic of Saudi coup-proofing requires singular attention below in a discussion of Saudi state patronage.

The Al Saud have mastered coup-proofing. The shah, on the other hand, had neither family, ethnic, nor religious ties to most of the people he placed in positions of power in his government. To be sure, he was removed from power by a full-fledged revolution and not a coup, but neither the administrative network nor the armed forces upon which his state was based were staffed with people whose loyalty the shah could guarantee. This weakness was painfully evident as the revolution matured.

3. State Patronage

Saudi Arabia is a rentier (or distributive) state—and the regime can afford to implement all the above measures because it is the sole distributor of Saudi oil revenues. The royal family has succeeded in making Saudi power centers dependent on the Al Saud: tribal authority, the religious establishment, commercial interests, and the population at large.

The regime’s ability to co-opt Arabian tribal power centers is discussed above. Whether the Al Saud can continue indefinitely to rely on tribal affiliations to tie together state and society in the event of a prolonged crisis in rents is debatable. Even when the modern world was *not* impinging on Saudi society, these ties were in flux. “The vicissitudes of time, the history of tribal migrations, the tendency of groups to segment into smaller units, the adoption of client tribes by those stronger, a smaller tribe’s use of the name of one more illustrious—all tend to make tenuous the tie between actual descent and the publicly accepted view of genealogy” (U.S. Library of Congress, 2005).

Urbanization on the scale experienced by Saudi Arabia in recent decades is another factor which weakens tribal bonds by replacing the tribal patron with various

state agencies which sustain and regulate civic life. Economic realities since the discovery of oil also have a deleterious effect on the importance of tribal affiliations because, “rulers, through the new mechanism of the state, [could] appeal directly to tribesmen, without the mediating figure of the shaykh” (Gause, 1994, p. 23). The regime, moreover, no longer has to rely on tribal groupings for financial support. Instead, the rulers had money to give away, or to bargain away in return for political loyalty. Physical and economic security thus came from the state. Tribal sheikhs became, effectively, salaried employees of the state, although the tribe still retains a great deal of power in the social arena (Gause, 1994, p. 23).

The Saudi regime relies on the Wahhabi establishment for a significant degree of its political legitimacy. The Al Saud sustain the original compact by continuing to fund the sprawling religious bureaucracy and publicly observing the kind of Islam promulgated by the clerics. This mutually beneficial relationship has endured since the original pact in the 18th century: “the political fortunes of the [Al Saud] family have been tied to [Al Wahhab’s] austere and puritanical interpretation of Islam,” says Gause, (2002).

The ‘ulama ... were the pillars of early Saudi administration, acting as judges, tax collectors and military recruiters. With the advent of oil wealth in the second half of the twentieth century, Saudi rulers created a vast system of mosques, schools and universities operated by the ‘ulama, large bureaucracies staffed by them (including the Saudi ministries of justice and pilgrimage affairs and the women’s education system), and international and non-governmental organizations ... to promote the spread of their interpretation of Islam (Gause, 2002).

The Al Saud have clearly reaped the benefits of Wahhabi doctrine, which requires obedience to the ruler who himself adheres to the doctrine. The clerics, in return, have routinely supported the ruling family and opposed those who sought to change the political order. “The higher ranks of the ‘ulama have regularly issued *fatawa*⁴⁶...condemning the domestic enemies of the Al Saud, ratifying transfers of power within the family, and supporting the policy choices of the rulers” (Gause, 2002).

The official religious establishment—whose clerics are on the government payroll—is sometimes seen by the average Saudi as a mere arm of the state, whereas

⁴⁶ *Fatawa*: plural of *fatwa*, or religious judgment.

clerics who are willing to speak out against the regime are afforded much greater popular credibility (ICG, 2004). Repeatedly, however, as seen in the wake of 9/11, these same clerics have been persuaded to either publicly recant or to otherwise come around to support the regime⁴⁷.

The regime's patronage is a major factor in the Saudi economy. Commenting on the economies of the Gulf's rentier states in general, Gause (1994) states that government control of oil revenues (its collection, distribution, and resulting purchasing power) has enormous political consequences because it is the government, not the market or regulatory bodies that determine the fortunes of Saudi businessmen:

It is impossible to succeed in business without the tacit, if not active, approval of the political elite. The economic levers in the hands of governments are such that they can irreparably harm any individual or firm perceived to be disloyal or dangerous. Conversely, governments can handsomely reward those in favor, and can even create socioeconomic interest groups that then become supporters of their regimes ... the costs of active political opposition to these governments are extremely high (p. 58).

The regime shows signs of becoming aware that the Saudi economy must become diversified in order for the state to remain solvent in the long term and stable in the event of a prolonged crisis in oil rents combined with troubling demographic trends. Reform has never taken place quickly in the Kingdom, however, so for the time being, "economic interests are vested in the state" (Gause, 1994, p. 58).

Another collective recipient of Saudi state patronage is the Saudi population. The regime is tied to its citizens by means of free or heavily subsidized housing, water, education, food, as well as employment. "Provision of all these economic benefits has a clear political intent: to convince the citizenry that their personal well-being is tied up with the existing political system" (Gause, 1994, pp. 61-63). The Saudi welfare state emerged in the wake of the 1970s oil boom. It created "a new life-style; the Saudi people who had previously lived an often difficult life sustained by hard work came to rely on

⁴⁷ See Chapter Two for a more detailed description of the Islamist opposition. Although the religious establishment can readily be considered as part of the state structure, I include it in Chapter Two because the mosque is the only avenue of real political expression in a repressive regime.

welfare and on millions of foreign workers to fill both manual and skilled jobs” (Cordesman, as quoted by ICG, 2004a). This new life style, however, was sustainable at a certain minimum oil price, and for a certain population threshold. Oil prices, though, are subject to volatile market fluctuations, and the population is (literally) a growing problem for the Saudi government. The Saudi population has tripled since the oil boom, and “government services have been unable to keep up ... Demographic projections portend more serious strains on the state and economy” (ICG, 2004a).

State patronage is thus a two-sided coin. The Saudi government is beginning to address demographic problems, but if the solutions are enacted in typically glacial fashion while population growth and unemployment rates continue to gallop, the problems have the potential to erode the regime’s legitimacy. This is so because the government has so far refused calls from all ranks of reformers for fiscal accountability with regard to oil revenues, government spending, military expenditures, and stipends paid to members of the royal family. The last point is the most critical to the regime’s legitimacy: while ordinary Saudis see their standard of living declining, it is widely known that thousands of princes in the vast royal family enjoy profligate lifestyles (ICG, 2004a). This undermines confidence between the state and society—the very ties that the regime otherwise works hard and spends lavishly to establish and sustain.

E. SUMMARY

The purpose of examining the structures of the Iranian and Saudi regimes is to discern similarities or differences between the two which would suggest whether there is any substance to some commentators’ suggestions that Saudi Arabia suffers from a structural weakness which places it in danger of following Iran down a revolutionary path, or that the Al Saud are in danger of being overthrown the moment an organized opposition forms. I find that whereas the Iranian state under the Shah was completely dependent on his personality, weakly integrated with society, and out of touch with ordinary Iranians, the Al Saud are less autocratic than paternalistic and are thus well integrated with Saudi society. They control state revenues, enabling them to build an extensive patronage system, which simultaneously prevents the rise of a financially autonomous opposition group.

In the near term, given oil prices lingering well over sixty dollars per barrel, the Saudi regime will remain stable. In a distributive state, however, control of resources does not necessarily confer legitimacy on those with their hands on the levers. If a prolonged crisis in rents ensued the Al Saud could, as in the past, rely not only on the fragile power of patronage, but also on tribal ties and the endorsement of the religious establishment to justify their continued rule. These ties, however, are not monolithic, and the long term solution of establishing state-society integration based on taxation and government accountability will undoubtedly be difficult. “Reforms in authoritarian regimes never derive from the impulsive noble motivations of autocratic rulers. International efforts to promote the cause of democracy in countries where the tradeoffs of undemocratic governance continue to be bearable for the ruling elites are bound to fail,” warns Amr Hamzawy (2005). Cordesman suggests a less pessimistic view: in light of the strong Saudi tradition of monarchical accessibility, and the fact that Saudi rulers have long cultivated patriarchal ties which integrate state and society, Saudi Arabia could, given much time, set the precedent.

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IV. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. FINDINGS

Iran's Islamic Revolution shook both the Middle East and the United States. It also took most international observers by surprise. Some credible voices are raising the prospect today of Saudi Arabia being the next Middle Eastern pillar to be swept away by a radical Islamic tide. Does this assertion stand up under scrutiny of the structural strengths and weaknesses of the two states and their opponents? The conclusion I arrive at is that the Saudi royal family is very unlikely to be toppled in the manner of the Shah of Iran, because the Al Saud are more integrated with society than their opponents: the Saudi opposition either supports the royal family, or is marginalized within society. The Shah, on the other hand, had very weak ties to Iranian society, while the Iranian opposition under Khomeini was deeply rooted and connected with ordinary Iranians.

To arrive at such a conclusion one must first have established that although there are stark dissimilarities between the two countries and political situations, the two are indeed comparable. In the introductory chapter we dispensed with some of the dissimilarities which might lead someone to dismiss the comparison outright. Cosmetic differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia—religious, social-ethnic, and era—were acknowledged, but shown not to preclude a meaningful comparison. The fact that Iran experienced the only Islamic revolution to date, and the similarities between the two—both countries had revolutionary underpinnings, both are regional heavyweights, and both regimes relied/rely for their survival on popular legitimacy—bolster the relevance of the comparison.

Chapters II and III advanced the comparison, evaluating the structural strengths and weaknesses of the regimes and opposition elements respectively. The conclusion above is based on substantial structural differences between the two situations. Whereas the Shah and his regime were out of touch with ordinary Iranians, Saudi royal influence permeates society via Al Saud patronage. Whereas the Iranian government relied heavily on the person and presence of the Shah, the Saudi government has, by all indications, seamlessly transferred power to Crown Prince Abdullah upon the death of King Fahd.

Whereas the Shah was unable to orchestrate compromise with his opponents, the Al Saud consistently demonstrate their ability to bring even their fiercest critics on side over time. Where Khomeini was able through informal networks to channel deep societal passions against the shah, al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) and exiled critics remain marginalized among Saudis, and the rest of the Saudi opposition professes loyalty to the Al Saud. The major findings of this thesis are summarized below:

- **Iran and Saudi Arabia are dissimilar, but comparable.** Persian, Shi'a, 1970s Iran is clearly not Arab, Sunni, contemporary Saudi Arabia. But it is worthwhile to study the single example of an Islamic Revolution in light of the many cautionary statements published regarding Saudi Arabia's vulnerability to the same. Moreover, both countries were/are key regional allies of the United States; both were/are important oil exporters; and both rely on their popular appeal for political legitimacy.

- **Iran's opposition was highly integrated in society, but the Shah's regime was not.** The shah fundamentally misread the true source of effective opposition to his regime: the forces gathered in the informal networks of the bazaar and mosque and manipulated by militant clerics. He equated opposition organizations with opposition forces, and therefore relied on modern, and formal, organizations (SAVAK, the bureaucracy, and the army) to control the booming, politicized urban population (Denoeux, 1993, p. 128). Having successfully co-opted, eclipsed or repressed opposition organizations such as the National Front, Tudeh, and labor unions, he assumed his work was done. But the fatal missing-ingredient in the Shah's regime structure was "the Shah's failure to rely on effective political organizations and/or well-established patronage networks "to provide a bridge between the regime and the urban population, and to compensate for the absence of formally organized political groups binding the monarchy to the modern middle class, the *bazaari* and religious communities, the working class, and uprooted peasants" (Denoeux, 1993, p. 102).

- **The Al Saud are well integrated with society, but the violent opposition is not.** Saudi Arabia's opposition groups are not, except for QAP, interested in overthrowing the regime. QAP is marginalized within Saudi society (although no definitive data exists to indicate what level of tacit support might exist in the population,

the government, or Saudi security forces). The Al Saud are well connected to society through vast patronage networks. They also recognize the royal imperative to stay connected to Saudi society. As (then) Crown Prince Abdullah acknowledges, “Those governments that don’t feel the pulse of the people and respond to it will suffer the fate of the Shah of Iran” (Dorsey, 2001). Additionally, King Abdullah is widely respected for his piety and for his stance against royal corruption and profligacy.⁴⁸

- **There is a notable absence of anthropological data on Saudi informal networks.** This is a consequential absence given the fact that informal networks are far more likely to produce a charismatic leader and a popular groundswell of opposition activity than a state-funded institution. Additionally, if such a movement were to arise, it would be less likely to the surprise with which the Iranian Islamic Revolution took the vast majority of western observers—if a way can be found to address it,

None of this should lead the reader to believe that threats to the Saudi status quo are nonexistent. The Saudi regime certainly faces considerable challenges—the power of patronage ebbs and flows with the price of oil; the regime is under domestic and international pressure to relinquish power to a more representative government and/or establish a constitutional monarchy; and the Iraq war may be the training ground for a new generation of Saudi Mujahideen. But these threats exist in the medium to long term, and are not dissimilar to threats the Al Saud have weathered in the past.

Some significant questions nevertheless remain. Chiefly, can the Al Saud *indefinitely* prevent violent opposition groups and/or forces from moving away from the margins of society to a central and powerful position? Secondly, remember that Khomeini was also a marginal figure, even within the Iranian clergy, so what keeps QAP from gaining popular legitimacy? Both of these questions could be helpfully addressed if some detail of Saudi informal networks were known. Since, as has already been noted, the Al Saud take few actions quickly, it is quite unlikely that they will suddenly discontinue in the long term the counter-opposition tactics that are proving so effective in

⁴⁸ Walter Lippman, a longtime observer of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, says, “King Abdullah has not been personally tainted by allegations of corruption. He is emblematic of traditional Bedouin values in a rapidly urbanizing society and is seen to have the stature and integrity among the populace to carry out the much-needed reform” (Lippman, 2005).

the short term. Therefore, some idea of the action channels and seats of informal power in Saudi society would provide valuable insight into those factors which affect whatever popular momentum QAP might be able to gain. That same knowledge would be indispensable for discovering early those potential opposition leaders whose charisma might persuade fence-sitting Saudis—those who approve of jihadist rhetoric but reject violent tactics—to either join or support QAP or other such organizations which might emerge. Again, the likelihood of instability accompanying the eventual return of Saudi anti-coalition fighters in Iraq should place a premium on the knowledge of Saudi informal networks for both the Saudi government and the kingdom’s allies and trading partners.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

The fact that the Iranian Islamic Revolution was a strategic surprise suggests that those responsible for evaluating the Iranian situation and making US policy decisions in 1978-79 were either not watching or not believing the right indicators. We now enjoy the luxury of hindsight in the Iranian case, but the fact remains that the Carter administration was unprepared to deal with such a rapidly evolving scenario. In order to avoid, or at least mitigate, a similar strategic surprise in Saudi Arabia, I advocate an Indications and Warning (I&W) problem which is based upon those conditions which cause informal networks to change from being system-supportive to system-challenging, as proposed by Guilain Denoeux (1993):

1. When a weakening (by internal division, military defeat, policy failure, etc.) regime is no longer able to keep its end of the bargain by providing favors to the patrons and security to the population
2. When clients exert pressure on local leaders to become involved on their side if the government threatens the interests of substantial segments of the urban population
3. When notables (i.e. channels through which state patronage is dispensed) themselves feel their interests and powers threatened by a regime’s policies or “the emergence of alternative sources of patronage that threatened to attract their clienteles” (Denoeux, 1988, p. 53).

Equal attention should be paid to those factors which enable opposition leaders to mobilize effectively against the state:

1. Resources at opposition's disposal—three types:
 - a. Financial independence from the government
 - b. Organizational independence from the government
 - c. Social influence: control over extensive social networks
2. Opposition leader feels his existence, values, or way of life threatened by hostile forces perceived to be associated with the authorities.
3. Opposition leader benefits from a weak, suddenly weakened, or indecisive central authority.

As discussed, the distributive Saudi state does not facilitate fiscal, organizational, or social independence. Nor is the Saudi state weak—the smooth succession of Abdullah demonstrates this well—leaving only the second factor at large. Al Qaeda acolytes certainly proclaim that their way of life and their values, embodied in Islam, are being threatened and corrupted by the “Jews and Crusaders” with whom the Al Saud associate. Most of Saudi society, however, accepts the Al Saud as the legitimate defenders of both Saudi Arabia and Islam.

Clearly an I&W system based on informal-network dynamics would have to address one of the findings of this thesis: the absence of detailed information about the nature, personalities and action channels of Saudi informal networks. Some degree of awareness is still possible by using I&W tippers which would reveal significant changes to the structures of both the Saudi regime and the opposition. These changes would be reflected or suggested by:

- Repeated demonstrations that Saudi clerics and Friday prayer leaders become willing to verbally oppose the regime (LaPointe, 2005).
- Willingness of political and/or social reformists to openly criticize the regime despite the threat of detention.

- Indications of open tension among the senior members of the royal family.⁴⁹
- Surveys which indicate rising support for both ideology and actions of al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP). Particular attention should be paid to security incidents as Saudi militants begin to return from fighting in Iraq.⁵⁰

The conclusion of the matter is that Saudi Arabia is not the next Iran, on the precipice of a radical Islamic overthrow. But the royal family faces myriad challenges in the medium to long term, and, as Mr. Clarke suggests the US is at risk of a future and spectacular intelligence failure because we are unable to “effectively collect intelligence inside “the kingdom”” (Clarke, 2005). US policy makers would be well advised to take advantage of the relative calm now to invest in closing the hole in our knowledge of Saudi informal urban networks in order to be prepared for the eventuality of a Khomeini-like leader rising to challenge a critical Middle Eastern ally.

⁴⁹ Disagreeable princes have, in the past, found themselves conducting extended, albeit opulent, stays abroad.

⁵⁰ While the numbers of Saudi fighters are disputed, they almost surely do not rival the numbers of young Saudis who ventured abroad on Saudi-government-subsidized trips to participate in the Afghan campaign against the Soviets. Many of the Saudis who fought in Afghanistan were there for short durations on the periphery of the campaign—a relatively small number became hardened veterans, and only time will tell if a similarly combat-experienced core of Iraq veterans emerges.

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